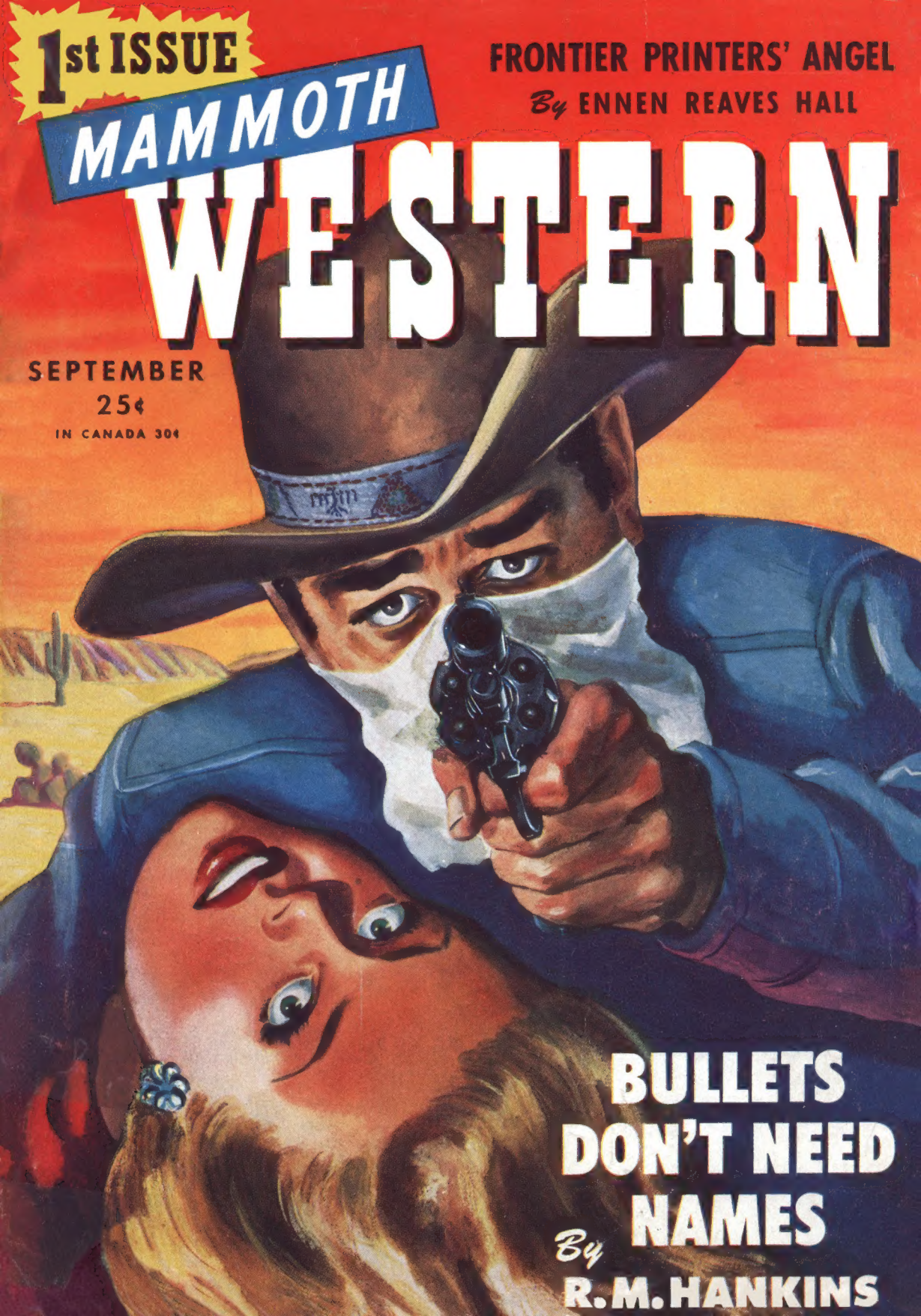
1st ISSUE
MAMMOTH
WESTERN
FRONTIER PRINTERS' ANGEL
By ENNEN REAVES HALL
SEPTEMBER
25¢
IN CANADA 30¢
BULLETS DON'T NEED NAMES
By R. M. HANKINS

A WESTERN LEGEND

IN THE HISTORY OF THE WEST, THE SAGA OF THE ALAMO HAS BECOME ONE OF THE LEGENDS OF AMERICA'S PAST THAT WILL LIVE FOREVER.

The final stand of Travis' warriors was in the church and convent; a few Texans held to the death against 5,000 attackers.

America would have been a vastly different country if the Mexicans, brave men too, had not been held up at the Alamo. Texas would be part of Mexico.

Bowie, ill of pleuro-pneumonia, sold his life dearly on his sick bed; dying [illegible] he had lived, with his famous knife i[illegible]

WE NEVER saw so much dust in our lives! Horses thundering past at break-neck pace, pursued by more horses ridden by Indians, pursued by still more horses ridden by cowboys (who killed the Indians who were riding on the first horses), followed by herds of stampeding cattle and buffalo—all charging through our office! Well, it isn't literally true, of course, but that's the way we feel, finishing up this first issue of our new Ziff-Davis baby, MAMMOTH WESTERN!

YEP, here it is, you western readers, the magazine we've been promising you for so long, a real, honest, straight-shooting magazine built along the same lines already made so well-known by our sister magazines, *Amazing Stories, Fantastic Adventures, Mammoth Mystery, Mammoth Detective* and *Air Adventures*. We've been planning it for a long time—in fact, it has been on our desk in page form for some months awaiting sufficient paper to bring it to you via the presses. Just wait until this paper shortage lifts! You can bet MAMMOTH WESTERN will be hitting you every single month jammed with the best western stories you've ever read. This issue is just a sample of the excellent (think we're bragging?) stories this magazine will feature.

BECAUSE there is a paper shortage, we've done something really unusual—we've refused any and all advertising contracts, even including the covers, so that we can use that space to give you more for your money in the way of stories. After the war, or when paper is available, we'll add many pages to the book, but meanwhile you readers are going to get all the breaks we can give you.

NOW a few words about the treats we've prepared for this first issue. First, we've secured a 70,000 word complete novel by that ace western novel writer, R. M. Hankins, called "Bullets Don't Need Names" and we think you'll find that you've got your two-bits worth right there! It's a $2.00 novel and not one single word has been taken out of it. When we say novel, we mean it, and we give you the exact wordage.

NEXT, a writer named Hall ought to make you hire one to shout in when you read "Frontier Printers' Angel." Here's a yarn that is different, and has some real people in it instead of the usual guys who go around shooting seven shots out of a six-shooter and making Indians bite a lot of dust, which strikes us as a gritty thing to do. Remember the name Ennen Reaves Hall—you'll be seeing it again because it means something good!

THEN there's Joseph Chadwick's "The Town That Wouldn't Squeal." We did, when we read it in manuscript form. Here's an unusual one, with the sort of emotional appeal that hits you right between the eyes. We congratulated Mr. Chadwick in getting out of a rut, and into some very fine writing . . . and we don't mean it's *his* rut—he never was in one!

WAYNE B. OVERHOLSER imagined himself a character named Hurney, who may be the type that is as old as the hills, but who said the hills weren't interesting? Well, they sure are when the character happens to be a guy named Hurney, and he does the kind of a thing that makes you proud that you are a member of the human race. "Hurney Goes Law Abidin' " isn't the usual yarn about the crook who goes straight. Read it, and see why we say that.

OF COURSE you recognize the name E. E. Halleran! You've see it so many times . . . Well, he's given us a short called "Outlaw Outpost" which is the kind of title that hides the real blast in the story—and when it goes off, man alive! We'll give you a hint . . . it's about a man who kills himself and happens to be left-handed, but forgets it in his excitement . . .

LASTLY we have Berkeley Livingston, whose name you've seen in all of our other magazines, but who has never written a western story in his life. But he begged us to give him a crack at it, and we agreed. We think you'll admit we didn't take any chances when we let him do "Deal 'Em Deep, But Not Dirty!" This one's about a father who decided to teach his son that gambling didn't pay—and dealt from the bottom of the deck in so doing. The result . . . well, you read it and see.

BESIDES all this, we've included a lot of special features we think you'll like. For instance, the back cover painting (better'n an ad, huh?) about Buffalo Bill. And now that we've given the new baby to you, we hope you like it. Write and tell us about it, will you?

Rap.

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

All STORIES Complete

BULLETS DON'T NEED NAMES
(Novel—70,000) ..... By R. M. Hankins 6
Illustrated by J. Allen St. John

He came out of nowhere and called himself Anonymous. Who was he, and where would his guns point?

FRONTIER PRINTERS' ANGEL
(Novelet—10,500) ..... By Ennen Reaves Hall 42
Illustrated by Robert Fuqua

Joel Madison didn't like women—which made it even worse when he found he'd hired one by mistake.

THE TOWN THAT WOULDN'T SQUEAL
(Short—5,000) ..... By Joseph Chadwick 62
Illustrated by Deckman

Everyone in town knew the killer's name, it was obvious. Yet not one accusing voice was raised.

HURNEY GOES LAW ABIDIN'
(Short—4,900) ..... By Wayne B. Overholser .. 74
Illustrated by Deckman

Every time Hurney came to town people looked at him as though he were a criminal—and he was; but . . .

OUTLAW OUTPOST
(Short—5,900) ..... By E. E. Halleran 86
Illustrated by Arnold Kohn

It was a neat little nest of outlaws, and one of them died by his own hand—but by the wrong hand!

"DEAL 'EM DEEP, BUT NOT DIRTY!"
(Short—6,600) ..... By Berkeley Livingston 98
Illustrated by Malcolm Smith

Curing your son of gambling is a good thing to do—but don't gamble with the kind of cure you use!

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Front cover painting by James Axelrod illustrating a scene from "Bullets Don't Need Names"
Back cover painting by James Axelrod depicting Buffalo Bill

MAMMOTH WESTERN
★
SEPTEMBER 1945

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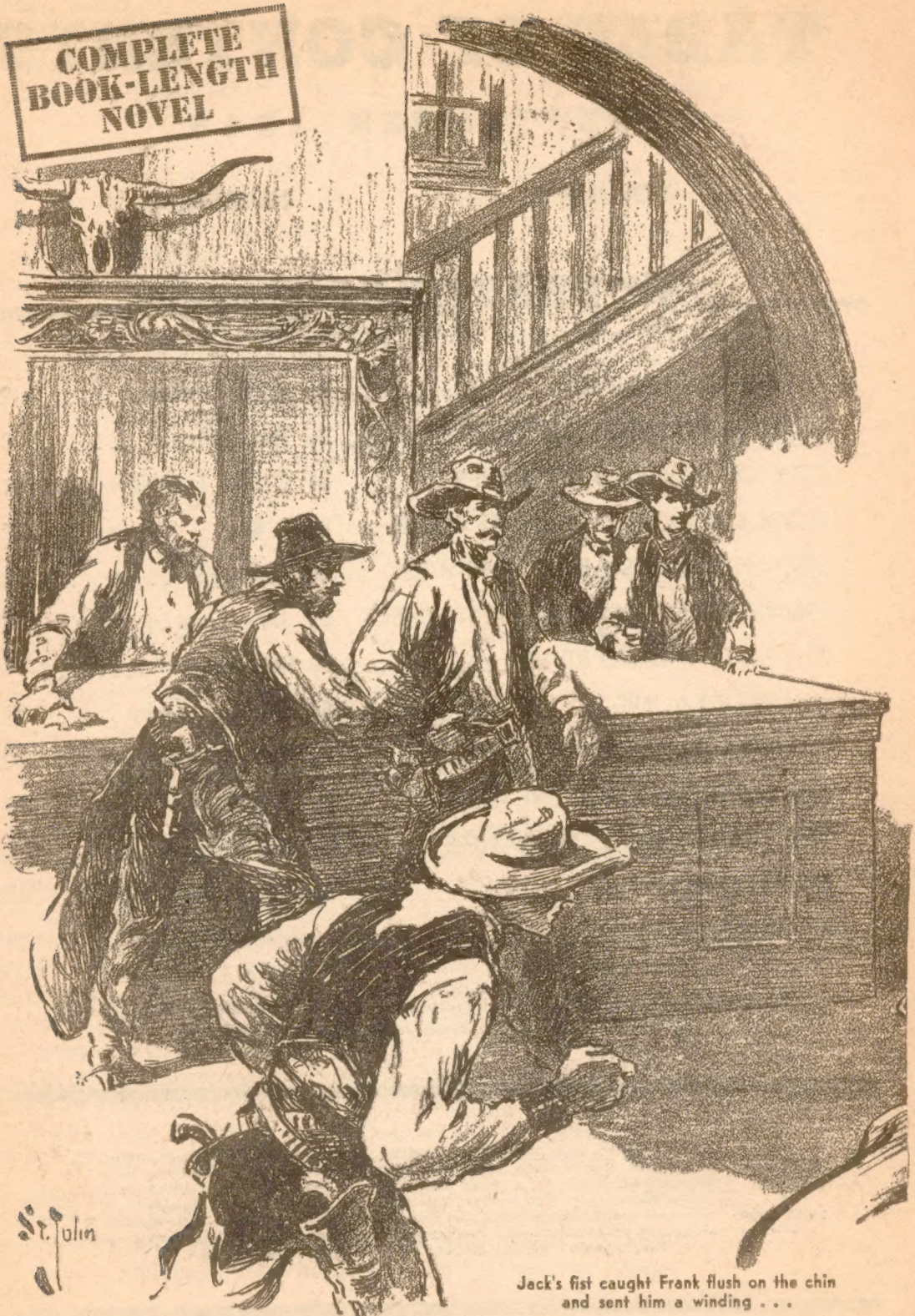
Volume 1
Number 1



Jack's fist caught Frank flush on the chin and sent him a winding . . .

"BULLETS DON'T NEED NAMES..."

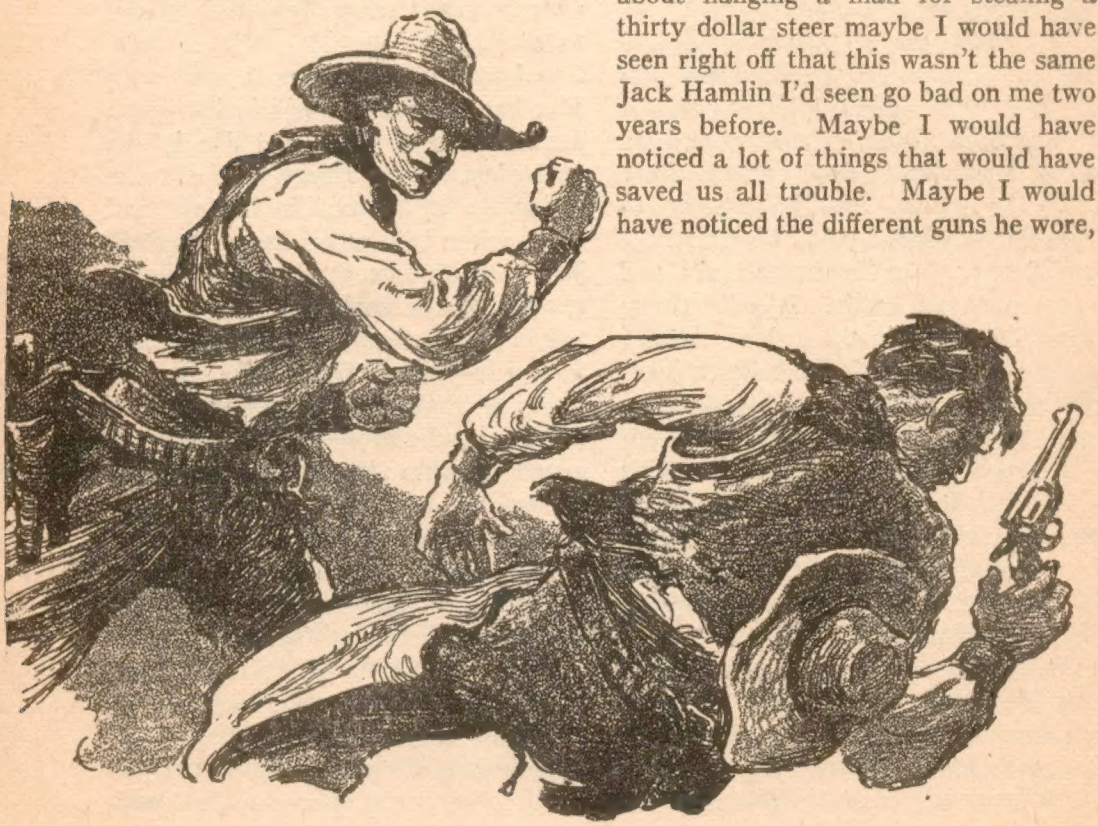
By R. M. HANKINS

JACK Hamlin's name was on a hangin' rope, but other men's were inscribed on lead bullets!

FOREWORD

I, HUGH McGOVERN, am considered a right tough old buzzard, *yet I never could stomach hanging a man!* Almost any reason for not hanging a man is a good reason. That's why I was mighty glad to have Young Jack Hamlin ride up and stop us just when we were about to kick the horse out from under Lefty Allen and leave him dangling. As much as I hated Young Jack Hamlin's guts I was glad to see him that day!

If I hadn't been so blamed upset about hanging a man for stealing a thirty dollar steer maybe I would have seen right off that this wasn't the same Jack Hamlin I'd seen go bad on me two years before. Maybe I would have noticed a lot of things that would have saved us all trouble. Maybe I would have noticed the different guns he wore,



the scar on his cheek, the missing eye-tooth, and that his rifle boot was empty. Maybe I would have noticed that the guy who had gone away soft and soaked full of liquor had come back cold as ice and hard as nails.

If I hadn't been all upset by having to hang Lefty, maybe I would have noticed all these things and got to wondering. Maybe I would have added them all up a lot sooner and saved a lot of grief to myself and Miss Sally. *Quien sabe?*

Guess I'd better go back and start from scratch, so as you'll know what I am talking about, and why I hated Young Jack Hamlin's guts and ran his ranch for him at the same time, and why Miss Sally had days when she wasn't just right in her mind.

CHAPTER I

YOUNG Jack's daddy, Captain Jack Hamlin, was a pretty rough old rooster. I know, I fought under him for four years in the Civil War—and he was as hard a man as ever booted his troop along from hell to breakfast! After the war was over, he came out to New Mexico and started his Jumping-Jack brand up on Lonesome River, and went to raising cattle. The Territory was plenty wild in those days—lots of outlaws that had left the states a jump ahead of the sheriff. And Apaches—well, you practically had to comb 'em out of your hair every morning. This was all right down Captain Jack's alley. If ever a man thrived on trouble it was him. It took a real man to run a ranch in those days, and Captain Jack Hamlin was it!

Being a junior clerk in a law office was kinda tame for me, after swinging a saber for four years, so the minute I heard about Captain Jack being in New Mexico I took my foot in hand and set forth myself. I didn't know shucks about cattle, but I could ride anything with legs and shoot better than most, so Captain Jack took me on, and I learned about cattle as I went along.

Harry Blake's Box brand lay just to the north of us. Pretty big outfit—had twenty or thirty hands and ran about as many cattle as we did. Harry Blake had been there for years, but the country was big and he hadn't raised any kick when Captain Jack moved in. On the other hand, Harry Blake wasn't a very sociable cuss, either. Never came over to say howdy or borrow a hunk of rock salt, or anything like that. Just stuck to his own business and let us alone. Guess he never would have come over if Jumping-Jack calves hadn't started going to Box cows.

When things like that start happening, and one man's stock gets all over another man's range, trouble is bound to start. And trouble did! A fight flared up and one of our boys killed a Box hand and there was hell to pay! I can still remember, just like it was yesterday, when Harry Blake came riding up with blood in his eye and eight or ten men at his back. Captain Jack and I were at the ranch alone, except for the cook. Two of us and ten or so of them, and the prospects looked kinda dark for a while.

Harry Blake was one of those tall, wiry, poker faced jiggers that the range country seems to breed. He didn't beat around the bush any. "You Captain Jack Hamlin?" he asked.

"The same," Old Jack said, cool as a cucumber, "and you, I am sure, must be Harry Blake. We've been expecting you. Get down and have a drink."

"We didn't come over here to do any drinking," Harry answered him. "We came over to hang one of your punchers for shooting one of our men. And may-

be to run you all out of the country."

"Did you, now?" Captain Jack asked.

"Yea, we did. We don't like our punchers being shot by total strangers, Captain Hamlin."

"I understand your viewpoint, Mr. Blake," Old Jack told him. "Your man wasn't bushwhacked, was he? Shot in a fair fight, wasn't he?"

"Yea, guess he was," Harry Blake admitted.

"Then what are you kicking about?" Old Jack asked, getting just as hard as Harry was. "We haven't been stealing any of your stock. Hell, we've got more of our own than we can look after properly."

THEY studied each other over for a minute, like a couple of strange dogs. Harry Blake had come expecting to find the usual assortment of rustlers—but instead he'd found a clean, well-kept ranch, run by a straight, upstanding man, hard as nails and as honest looking as all get-out!

"Shucks, stranger," Harry said, getting down off his horse, "I'll take that drink if the offer still holds good. Go on home, boys—the fight's off. Maybe you can bag an Indian or two on the way just to sorta make up for it."

The upshot of it all was that those two got to be right good friends. Visited back and forth, got drunk together now and then, and threw their outfits together a time or two when rustling got bad. After a year or so, they struck up a partnership and formed the Jack-in-the-Box brand.

The Territory was full of riffraff in those days—and a good big outfit was a whole lot better than two little ones, so they were both better off for the partnership. It gave them about 250,000 acres of good range, plenty of water, and forty to fifty hands. They were big enough and strong enough to keep the apaches off, and just too blamed big for the rustlers to monkey with.

Captain Jack and Harry Blake prospered together. They bought up all the good land along Lonesome River, and had some of the boys homestead a lot more good range for them. At the end of five years their holdings were pretty extensive, and they began to make money hand over fist. I'd tamed down some by then—learned when to shoot and when to shut up—so when Dutchy Van Duyn got killed by a miner down at Hurley they gave me his job as foreman.

Captain Jack went back east and got married. Brought him back one of those Back Bay school teachers—pretty as the picture on a tomato can! She came from one of those old-time, holier than thou families, and was as straight laced as Old Jack was a rip-snorter. Whatever they saw in each other I never could figure out, but they hit it off together as happy as two birds on a limb!

Harry Blake took the veil about the same time—married Sally Abercrombie from over on North Creek. A sassy little black-haired Scotch girl she was, with a devil in her eyes. Sally Abercrombie could dance us all down and still be fresh as a daisy.

Captain Jack and Harry Blake tried to see who could build the biggest and finest house for his bride—and I guess Captain Jack won. Built him a great big rambling Spanish house of 'dobe. Walls two feet thick to keep the heat out in summer and the cold out in winter—and bullets out all the time. Freighted in a piano and all sorts of fancy furniture, oil paintings, mirrors and such from El Paso. Quite a place Captain Jack built for himself and his bride.

THEY were happy as all get-out, right up to the day when Captain Jack and Harry got caught by a cloudburst in a dry arroyo. We found 'em two days later and the whole county came to the funeral!

Young Jack was five years old when they got drowned, too young to know what it was all about, except that his daddy was gone and wasn't coming back. Harry Blake's kids, Harry, Jr., and little Sally, were five and three each. From then on I was practically daddy to all three of them, right up to the time Young Jack went to the bad and left the country.

Harry Blake's wife pined away and died, six or eights months after Harry was drowned—so Mrs. Hamlin brought the kids over to her house and raised them like her own. She left the running of the ranch to me, and doing the daddy side of raising the kids, too. They were pretty rich kids, as things went in those days, but I didn't raise them up with any foolish notions about themselves. No, sir! Young Jack and Harry did everything that other range boys did. They chopped wood and hauled water when they were little, and when they got bigger they dug post holes and strung wire and doctored sick steers and all.

When Young Jack and Harry were twelve I took 'em on their first roundup, and what a time they had! The two of them together did about a man's work between them, so I put them on at half pay. They had a high old time spending their first wages. Young Jack bought him a pearl handled forty-five. Carried it with him all the rest of his life. Never could shoot for sour apples with it or any other gun—but he wanted one and so he spent his first wages on it. Guess most of us are that way. No, sir, Young Jack never was without that pearl handled gun.

In the winter they got a little schooling down in Silver City. Learned their A.B.C.'s and how to count to ten and all about King Arthur and such. Harry and Jack had their first big fight over who was to be King Arthur and finally called me in to referee it. They'd both made the same score tilting at rings with the lances they had made—so there wasn't anything for me to do but introduce them to a deck of cards and let them cut for high. Young Jack lost and took it sorta hard for a while, but he soon got over it. After all he got to be Launcelot, who had a lot more fun ramming around the country, and he didn't have to be married to "old Guinevere," as he put it. Little Sally was Guinevere and had a high old time. Likely she'd rather have been playing house or store or something with other little girls, but there weren't any other little girls within forty miles, so she took the best things that came along.

Mrs. Hamlin thought Young Jack and Harry ought to have a little higher education, so she sent them to St. Michael's, in Santa Fe, for a couple of years. I couldn't see how knowing what the square on the hypotenuse was would help pull a steer out of a mudhole, but Mrs. Hamlin said it would broaden their outlooks, and she was boss—so to St. Michael's they went. They came back all running over with knowledge. They'd learned to play poker and shoot craps and drink tequila and such—as well as learning all about geometry and how far is London.

They took a crack at boozing around and gambling and sowing their wild oats and came through it all with pretty level heads and the right slant on things. They learned to stop drinking when they'd had enough, and not to bellyache when their pair of aces got beat by three deuces. Young Jack was inclined to be a little headstrong, but Harry

was a little over cautious—so the two of them together made a good rounded out pair. By the time they were both twenty-one they were seasoned range hands—ready to run the ranch as provided in the wills of Old Jack Hamlin and Harry Blake.

CHAPTER II

MISS SALLY dropped out of the picture for a couple of years, having been sent to a girl's school in Denver to learn etiquette, and not to slur her R's and eat with three forks and all that foolishness that didn't make her one bit sweeter or nicer.

I'd remembered her as a long-legged kid with a lot of freckles and an impudent grin—but when she climbed down from the train that day in Silver City she was as pretty a young woman as I ever laid eyes on. She was middling tall, with hair black as the ace of spades. Her impudent grin had toned down to two big brown eyes with a twinkle of mischief in them. She was full of poise and Shakespeare and knew when to say thank you. And when she got on a horse the next day she filled her overalls a lot fuller than she did when she went away. Yes, sir, Miss Sally came back from Denver a grown young woman—and the first thing you knew every young buck in Grant County was beauing her around.

Young Jack was like all the rest of them—he fell for her like a ton of bricks. I reckon she'd been in love with him all along, but she never let on—just kept him dangling around, egging him on one day and blowing cold on him the next. She went riding quite a bit with Frank Reilly, the dirty son. But I'm getting ahead of my story—I didn't know about Frank, then.

Frank Reilly was quite a bit older than Miss Sally—one of those tough handsome guys that think they are hell and repeat with women. Nobody knew where he came from, or how he'd made his money—but he minded his own business and ran his ranch square and nobody asked him any questions.

Young Jack didn't much like Miss Sally's going with Frank Reilly—but shucks, you can't tell a woman who to go around with and who not to. You can try—but you can't anywheres with your telling. You can tell a man where to head in sometimes, though—and that's just what Young Jack finally did.

One night I was in the Crystal Palace, over at Georgetown, having a few snorts of rye to celebrate a good sale of steers. Young Jack and Harry Blake came in, had a few beers, played a little stud, and started home. This Frank Reilly came in just as they were getting ready to leave.

"Don't let me scare you boys away," Frank said. "I don't never harm small fry."

"Ever beat on an empty barrel, Jack?" Harry asked, ignoring Frank Reilly.

"Yea," Jack said, winking at Harry. "Empty ones always do make the most noise. Drums are that way, too—just big skins full of wind that make a hell of a racket."

"Reckon we better get out of here, Jack, before the big bad wolf gets us?"

"Oh, you mean Mister Reilly? Yep, we better put our tails between our legs and scat, Harry. He's apt to blow his breath on us and wither us up, he's that mean."

FRANK REILLY saw he was getting the worst of this ribbing. A few of the boys around the bar were beginning to snicker and not many men can stand to be laughed at. "Listen here, you two young smart alecks," Frank told them, "you run along home

and get tucked in bed and get you lots of sleep. And when you get to be growed up men, come back and I'll knock your heads together."

"All both of us?" Jack asked.

"Yea, young squirt," Frank sneered at him. "All both of you."

Jack took off his coat, unbuckled his gun belt, the dumb-young-puncher look leaving his face. "You know, Frank, I never was one to put things off. And you won't have to whip us both at once. One at a time will do. What do you say, Frank—loser pays for everything that gets broke?"

"Suits me," Frank handed his gun to the bartender, not even bothering to take off his coat. "There ain't going to be any breakage, though. One good swing will do the trick. Loser pays for drinks all around?"

"Fire when ready, Gridley," Jack said and they were at it hammer and tongs. Frank must have been thirty pounds heavier. He was older, wiser, a seasoned fighter—but the beating he took that night was terrific. Jack was considerably marked up himself—but when he got through with Frank Reilly there wasn't much more he could do to Frank. Why, gentlemen, Frank Reilly was little better than a pulp when we finally pulled Young Jack Hamlin off of him that night in Georgetown. Frank finally came to and grabbed his gun from the bar man, but some of us took it away from him again—and he left the Crystal Palace swearing a blue streak and promising to get even if it took a hundred years.

After the fight, all the boys sorta got the idea and steered clear of Miss Sally. She was Young Jack's girl after that—and nobody was gladder than I was when they announced that they were going to get married after the round-up that fall.

An old buzzard like me doesn't know much about love — it always seemed like a bucket of foam to me—but those two seemed to have what it took to make a go of things. They were both crazy about each other, they'd been raised together, had known each other all their lives and owned parts of the same ranch. If anybody should have made a go of matrimony it was Sally Blake and Young Jack Hamlin.

THAT fall, after the round-up was over and the cattle shipped and the money banked, they got married. Folks came from two hundred miles around—weddings were scarce in those days and something to celebrate for three or four days on end. Every room in the house was full, the bunkhouse was running over, and a couple dozen or so boys beded down in the hayloft. Everybody came to kiss the bride, and get drunker than a skunk and raise a little hell. Old Hennery had worked for days getting ready—baking pies and doughnuts, barbecuing steers and roasting ducks. There was venison and wild turkey, too! There were barrels of beer and kegs of "Red Likker" for such as liked it. Yes, sir, it was a great day when Sally Blake married up with Young Jack Hamlin!

I couldn't have thought more of Young Jack if he had been my own son. He was as fine and clean a young fellow as I had ever run across. And her—well, it was a good thing for Jack Hamlin that I wasn't ten years younger. I would have given him a run for his money, by golly! A good-looking pair they made, standing up in front of the preacher and promising to love, honor and obey—in sickness and in health.

That part kinda stuck in my mind —*in sickness and in health.* I kept wondering why they put such foolishness as that in a wedding ceremony.

Jack and Sally looked so healthy I couldn't imagine them ever being sick. But a lot of things have happened that I couldn't imagine. You play the red and the wheel turns, and there's the black—

After the wedding was over, and everybody had eaten and likkered up and danced until they were sober again Young Jack and Miss Sally got in the buckboard and started for Silver City to take a train for San Francisco. Forty or fifty of us followed them into town and loaded them on the train—with more whooping and hollering and shooting than the town had ever heard before.

I had to bail nine of the boys out in the morning and pay their fines for being drunk and disorderly and all—but shucks, it was worth it just to have Young Jack and Miss Sally happy with each other!

CHAPTER III

IT WAS tough luck, Young Jack Hamlin having to kill a man just two weeks after he got back from his honeymoon. If he hadn't done it, maybe all the rest might not have happened. *Quien sabe?* But he did—and a bride of two months or so is bound to get a little upset when her husband kills a man—particularly when she is going to have a baby.

Frank Reilly must have had a hand in it somehow. Frank was still mighty sore over the beating Jack had given him, and Jack didn't have any other enemies—so it must have been Frank Reilly that cooked it all up.

Miss Sally and Jack were gone six weeks on their honeymoon, and came back happy as two meadow larks! Miss Sally had bought her a trunkload of new clothes and Young Jack had brought presents for all the boys. Brought me a pair of imported Swiss binoculars that must have set him back a tidy sum. Everybody was happy, everything was fine—until this Dusty Deane showed up in Georgetown!

In my mind, the lowest form of human life is the paid killer—and that's what Dusty Deane was. A cold-blooded killer, sure death with either gun. He was a mean man to tangle with—all his killings were air-tight cases. He'd goad his victim into drawing on him and then Dusty would shoot faster and straighter and make a case of self-defense out of it. Just plain legalized murder—but that's the way things were done in those days.

Georgetown was one of the roughest towns in the territory. Started as a mining camp and got to be the hang-out of all the shady characters in that neck of the woods. A real, old-time roaring frontier town if there ever was one.

Young Jack and I had been over at the west line camp and stopped in at Georgetown, on the way back, to have a couple of beers and a bite to eat. We were in the Crystal Palace rolling dice for our beers when this Dusty Deane came in and ordered a drink. I could see him in the mirror sizing us up, asking Bluebeard, the bartender, who we were. Bluebeard must have told him that we were having a drink before we ate, because he was planted in the doorway at the Chinaman's when we got over there to eat.

MAYBE Dusty Deane got in Jack's way on purpose—maybe Frank Reilly had hired him for the job. I dunno. Anyway, Young Jack bumped smack into him and gave him an awful bust in the ribs and Dusty got madder than a hornet.

"Watch where you're going, you young squirt," he snapped at Jack.

"Why, excuse me, stranger," Young Jack apologized. "Guess I wasn't watching where I was going."

"Well, you damned fool, why don't you watch?"

"Looky, stranger," Jack said in a mild, peaceful sort of a voice. "I didn't go to bump into you, honest I didn't. I'm plumb sorry and I apologize. There's no call for you to go and get so hostile about it."

"No?" this Dusty was fairly boiling mad now. He said a few words about Young Jack's ancestry that no man can take.

"What did you say, stranger?" Young Jack asked him in that same mild voice.

Dusty repeated himself — a little stronger and louder.

"Thanks, stranger," Jack said, not raising his voice even, "that's what I thought you said." And wham—he uncorked a right to Dusty's chin that knocked Dusty end over appetite! Dusty Deane hit the wall, clean across the room and bounced to his feet with a gun in each hand. His voice, too, was quiet now—and cold as ice.

Dusty said, "I'm not going to kill you here and spoil these gentlemen's dinners for them. I'll be over in the Crystal Palace. I'll be there for an hour. No more, no less. If you aren't over there in that time I'll hunt you down and shoot you in your tracks."

"Give me an order of ham and eggs, Louie," Jack yelled at the Chinaman, completely ignoring Dusty. He didn't say another word—just waited for his ham and eggs and ate them slowly and calmly like he enjoyed every bite.

"You know, Hugh, that's Dusty Deane," he said when he had finished eating. "Who do you reckon could have sicked him on me?"

"Dunno, son," I told him. "Guess it don't make much difference who hired him. He's here, and if the stories about him are true he's hell on wheels. Reckon we better ease on out of town while you're all in one piece?"

Jack thought it over a while. "Wish we could do that, Hugh—but I'd never live it down if I ran out on him."

"Shucks, kid, nobody would hold it against you," I told him—but I knew it wasn't true. People wouldn't blame him at first, but sooner or later he'd be the guy that ran out on Dusty Deane. But I had to do my best to keep him from getting murdered. "Everybody knows Dusty Deane is a paid killer, Jack, and everybody knows you can't shoot for sour apples. It wouldn't be an even break anyway you work it. Let's get out of here—your friends will understand."

"Nope, Hugh, it won't work. Right off people won't say anything—but the first thing you know some young gunman will try to do the same thing Dusty Deane did and then I'll have it on my hands again. Nope, Hugh. I've got to live here the rest of my life—if I live at all." He rolled him a cigarette and thought a while. "Better give me that belly gun of yours, Hugh—maybe I can work it that way."

HE MUST have figured it all out while he was eating and made his plans—so I gave him my belly gun. A stubby, sawed-off forty-four not much bigger than your hand. It was no good for long shooting—but for barroom fights a belly gun is hard to beat. You can get one of those sawed-offs out in nothing flat, and you can't miss at five or six feet with it!

"Try and get as close to him as you can before you cut loose, son," I cautioned him. He put the belly gun in his pocket and beat it for the Crystal Palace like a firehorse going to a fire. I ran, too, and saw the whole thing.

Young Jack got clear up to Dusty before Dusty saw him. Guess he wasn't expecting such quick action. Jack told him, short and sweet, "You were shooting off your mouth considerable, over at the Chinaman's. You were talking big for a little man. So, whatever it was you were going to do—why, do it, or latch your face!"

Dusty reached for his guns and got them out—but Jack shot through his coat pocket and got Dusty low down. Hit him plumb in the middle of the belly—the hole was as big as your fist and Dusty died of it two hours later. It was a slow, painful death, but many's the man Dusty had done the same thing to!

There were plenty of witnesses to show that Dusty had picked the fight over at the Chinaman's, and plenty to state that he had gone for his guns first. Nobody much gave a damn anyway—so there wasn't any trouble from the law over the killing. But it did, somehow, lay the foundation for a little wall that grew up between Young Jack and Miss Sally. It was the beginning of a lot of small things that finally grew into something big and drove them apart.

As I said, Miss Sally was going to have a baby. When the news got around, folks couldn't do too much for her. Old Hennery even got on a horse one day—first time in forty-one years, he said—and rounded up three or four range cows and tied 'em fore an aft until he got 'em trained to stand while he milked them. Wanted Miss Sally to have fresh milk, not canned milk. Shorty McGuire spent his evenings and Sundays cutting ice on Lonesome River and storing it in the dugout, so Miss Sally and the baby could have cool things when it got hot next summer. Yes, sir, everybody was as nice as pie to her, once it got aired around that she was going to have a baby!

Maybe women who are that way are kinda unbalanced. Maybe all the attention she'd been getting had gone to Miss Sally's head. *Quien sabe?* Anyway, she didn't take the news of Jack's killing Dusty the way I had expected her to. She didn't say—thank God you're safe, Jack, and don't feel bad about it—or anything like that. Nope, she didn't say anything comforting or understanding.

"What do you have to be fighting all the time for, Jack Hamlin?" she snapped at him. "Why did you have to go and kill a man? Do you think I want my baby to have a killer for a father?"

JACK didn't know what to say to that, and I wouldn't have either. He didn't even answer her. Just got on his horse and went in to Silver City and stayed drunk for three, four days. Guess I would have done the same thing if I'd killed a man in self-defense and my wife had given me hell about it! I've studied things over some since then and I reckon it was having a baby and being scared and everything that made her that way—for she really wouldn't have hurt a fly on purpose. But Jack was young and hot-headed and didn't reason it out.

Miss Sally took to being sweet to all the people that were nice to her—and riding Young Jack right hard about everything that he did. Maybe he could have honeyed her a little and talked her out of it, but that wasn't his nature. He got to riding to town oftener and oftener, and drinking more and more. He was half-way famous, anyway—the man who downed Dusty Deane, the notorious killer—and everybody was glad to have a drink with him. Reckon it sort of went to his head some, and he got the wrong slant on things, too.

Harry Blake gave up his girl over on

Willow Creek and started riding herd on Young Jack when he went to town. Drank with him, gambled with him, managed to keep Jack from drinking too much and losing too much money. Yes, sir, Harry was a right good friend to Jack and Jack knew it—but when a man is down in the dumps the way Jack was he's apt to be a little short, even with his best friends. They got to quarreling a little over how much Jack was drinking and gambling—and Harry kept having more and more trouble getting Jack to go home at night. Many is the time they didn't get in until daybreak. Yes, sir, Harry Blake was a real guy to take all he did from Young Jack and not get mad about it.

And then one night over at the Crystal Palace in Georgetown, about six months after he'd killed Dusty Deane, Young Jack got drunker than seven hundred dollars! He wouldn't hear of going home. He was going to hang his pants on a deer head on the wall and sleep in the bar, by golly. And then he wanted to find the bartender, Bluebeard, who had the thickest, blackest beard I've ever seen on a man, and shave him. All the damned fool things a man wants to do when he is drunk Young Jack wanted to do that night in the Crystal Palace in Georgetown. From what I hear, Harry had one hell of a time with him. Folks that were there say that Jack called Harry every name in the book before Harry got him on his horse and started home.

I was about half asleep, down in the foreman's cabin—when I heard horses come up to the house. I heard a shot—and then Miss Sally screamed! God, it was an unearthly sound! I went a running to the house and a horse went pounding off into the night. And there on the ground was Harry Blake—a bullet hole under his heart and his blood streaming all over Miss Sally who was holding his head in her lap!

Miss Sally was wild-eyed with terror, dazed looking. All she would do was shake her head and say over and over, "It was Jack, I saw him. It was Jack."

That was all she'd say—we couldn't shake her story or get her to tell us any more. She just kept saying "It was Jack" until she fainted dead away and Old Hennery carried her up to the house and Shorty McGuire went for the doctor.

CHAPTER IV

I TRIED to stop Harry's bleeding until the doctor got there, but he was hit so bad he didn't live over thirty or forty minutes. He came to once and said, "Don't do it, Jack—for God's sake don't do it. It's cold, Jack."

Doc McClary got there too late—Harry was gone. A guy that never harmed anybody, shot down in cold blood! McClary dug out the bullet that killed him. It was a forty-five and didn't prove a thing—half the men in Grant County, including Jack Hamlin, packed forty-fives. Doc McClary decided to spend what was left of the night at the ranch, and it was a good thing he did. Being right there on the spot he was able to save Miss Sally's life!

Her baby was born prematurely the next morning. It never breathed a single breath. Miss Sally didn't know it—reckon it was a good thing she was still unconscious. The grief might have killed her then and there.

Young Jack got home about noon, with a terrific hang-over, and asked us what we were all so gloomy about.

"What the hell did you have to come back here for?" I fairly yelled at him. "Why didn't you go on and leave the country or break your damned neck or something?"

"Why should I leave the country, Hugh? What's up?" Jack rubbed his head and shook it to clear the cobwebs away. "What's it all about, Hugh?"

"'What's it all about, Hugh?'" I mimicked him. "'What's it all about?' As if you didn't know. Miss Sally saw you do it. And Harry practically said you did before he died."

"What do you mean, Hugh? What did I do? Did you say Harry was dead?"

"He's deader than hell, Jack—and you did it! Were you so drunk you don't remember riding home with Harry last night and shooting him in cold blood?"

"Me?—kill Harry? It couldn't have been, Hugh. It couldn't have been! He left me over at Jesus Garcia's shack. Honest to God he did, Hugh."

"Yea? Well, Miss Sally saw you do it. And Harry said before he died—'Don't do it, Jack!' That's enough for me," I told him, sorta sorry for him, all bewildered like he was—but I was already beginning to hate his guts.

About that time Sheriff Banks got on the job and took Jack into custody and I didn't get to say much more to him. Banks asked a lot of questions and snooped around and measured tracks and all and finally went off back to town taking Young Jack with him. Jack didn't even get to see Miss Sally or ask about her.

THEY kept Young Jack in jail for three or four days while they were investigating things. They tried to check with Jesus Garcia over on Salt Creek to see if Jack really had spent the night there like he said he had. But they couldn't find Jesus Garcia—his shack was locked up tight and his stock turned out. Later they found out he had bought a ticket for El Paso the morning after Harry got killed. A wire to El Paso found that he'd left El Paso the same day he got there and gone on down to Chihuahua somewheres. So Jack didn't have any alibi. It looked like an open and shut case against him. Art Norcop, the county attorney, did his best to get Jack indicted for murder—but he reckoned without Old Jack Hamlin's friends.

There were a lot of them on the grand jury and they didn't believe Old Jack would sire a kid ornery enough to kill his best friend and wife's brother. So they no-billed him on the grounds that the only witness was Jack's wife, and she couldn't testify against her husband.

So they turned Young Jack loose and he came on back to the ranch—but I wish he hadn't. I wished he'd left the country right off instead of waiting until he was hounded out of it. There's nothing you hate more than something you've practically raised by hand that goes bad on you. And that is what Young Jack Hamlin had done—gone plumb bad on me! All he would do was sit around half drunk all the time. The hands wouldn't take orders from him. Three or four of them quit—said they wouldn't work for a skunk like him. If Miss Sally hadn't needed me, I would have quit myself. Deep down inside of me I knew, grand jury or no grand jury, that Young Jack Hamlin had killed Harry Blake—and I hated the very ground he walked on for it!

Miss Sally regained consciousness after three or four days—but most of the time she was stark, raving mad! Now and then she would seem all right until she saw Young Jack and then she would be off again. Young Jack got to where he couldn't stand it and started doing his drinking in town. Finally he couldn't stand that either, and left the country.

Folks in town wouldn't have a thing

to do with him. They didn't lynch him, out of respect for Miss Sally—but in every other way possible they practically crucified him. If he tried to horn into a card game, the game broke up. If he went into a bar, folks walked out of it. Nobody would talk to him but bartenders, and all they'd say was "What's yours gonna be?"

Young Jack got to drinking more and coming home less and less. Miss Sally wouldn't have a thing to do with him the few times he did come home. All she'd do was cry and ask to see her baby—and we'd have to tell her she couldn't see him that day. Maybe tomorrow when she was stronger. So there really wasn't any reason why Young Jack should hang around—and one day he just didn't come back.

AFTER he'd been gone about two weeks, Jeff Malone, who owned the Cattlemen's Bank, came out with a power of attorney for me that Jack had left. Gave me the right to buy and sell stock and run the place the way I pleased—in fact, do anything I wanted to but sell the ranch itself.

So I ran the place and did a right good job of it, too! Made quite a bit of money—but it took a lot to pay the doctors I got to come and look Miss Sally over. Specialists are pretty high-priced boys to monkey with—but I got her the best to be had in those days. None of them could do her any good. Every time one of them told me so I got to hating Young Jack Hamlin more and more. I finally got to where I didn't want to kill him any more—I wanted to torture him. To do something to him that he'd be years dying of!

Didn't hear a word from him for nearly two years. Once in a while a check would come through the bank—but not often and never for much money. And it was a good thing they weren't for much—for the past six months things had been going to hell on the Jack-in-the-Box!

We'd had a couple of men bushwhacked. We'd lost more stock than a ranch can lose and make money. Not enough to bankrupt us, you understand—but enough to be serious if it wasn't stopped. We'd caught us a rustler or two and turned 'em over to the Sheriff, but they hadn't been able to convict any of them.

About two months before the day we were hanging Lefty Allen I got a wire from Jack in Denver, telling me to meet him in Silver City with a horse. Hell, I wouldn't have ridden across the road to take him a horse, but after all, it was his ranch—so I sent Roots Ansell to town to meet him. Roots waited around five or six days, drank up a couple of months' pay, won a couple more at stud and spent it on a waitress in the Oriental Cafe. Finally he gave it up as a bad job and come on back to the ranch. We figured that maybe Jack had got drunk and sent us a wire and forgot about it when he sobered up. So we forgot all about it, too!

As I was saying, we'd been missing quite a lot of stock that fall. All big outfits lose some and think nothing of it—but this year somebody had been working us regular. The rustlers we'd captured had been turned loose by the law—so we decided to string up the next one we caught, just like we used to do—just as a warning to the rest of them to go and do their stealing somewhere else and leave us alone.

So there we were—ready to kick the horse out from under Lefty Allen and leave him dangling—to twist, and turn and die as slow and miserable a death as a man ever died— When Jack Hamlin came fancy footing up the trail on a Wyoming horse!

"Don't do it, Hugh. Don't do it."

He pulled his horse to a stop and sat there, cool and calm and capable looking. He had two black-handled forty-fours tied low down and he looked hard as nails. He looked like a fighting man that could use those forty-fours and would in a minute. You just looked at him and felt that—he was Jack Hamlin, but he was different!

I SHOULD have smelled a nigger in the woodpile right then and there. Young Jack Hamlin had never been a hard case. He hadn't packed forty-fours, either—he'd always used a pearl-handled forty-five—but he couldn't shoot for sour apples with it. Did all his good shooting with a rifle—yet his rifle boot was empty that day.

"It's your ranch, Jack," I told him, being glad to get out of the hanging, but not wanting to back down too easy. "And it's your cattle that's being stolen. If you don't want rustlers hung, I reckon it ain't no skin off my teeth."

"What do you want to hang him for, Hugh?" Jack asked me. "He been stealing your chickens or something?"

"We caught him running off a steer," I said.

"Hell, ain't a man's life worth more than a steer? Steers only bring thirty, forty dollars at the most."

"Yea," I told him, "any man's life—that is, almost any man's—is worth more than a thirty-dollar steer. But this ain't the only steer involved—we've lost plenty this fall."

"That's pretty bad, Hugh," Jack said, "and it ought to be stopped. But are you sure this jigger stole them all?"

"No, I'm not. We just caught him with this one!"

"Well, give him the benefit of the doubt, Hugh." Jack's eyes were cold, and yet they were laughing at me somehow. "Give him his gun and turn him loose. Better get out of this part of the country, stranger," he turned and said to Lefty, "or you might end up in trouble."

"Thanks, friend," said the man we didn't hang, buckling on the gun I gave back to him. "My name is Lefty Allen, and I take this right kind of you. Should you ever get your tail in a crack yourself, just holler and I'll be there."

Jack had hardly looked at Lefty until he spoke. Something in Lefty's voice—it was a deep, slow voice that you'd never have expected in a slim jigger that looked like a hunk of whang leather that needed a shave—something in Lefty's voice must have interested Young Jack, for he eyed Lefty quite a spell. And Lefty looked back at him, stare for stare, without flinching. They must have read something in each other's eyes.

"Can you shoot, Lefty?" Jack asked him.

"I have shot some," Lefty answered without cracking a smile even.

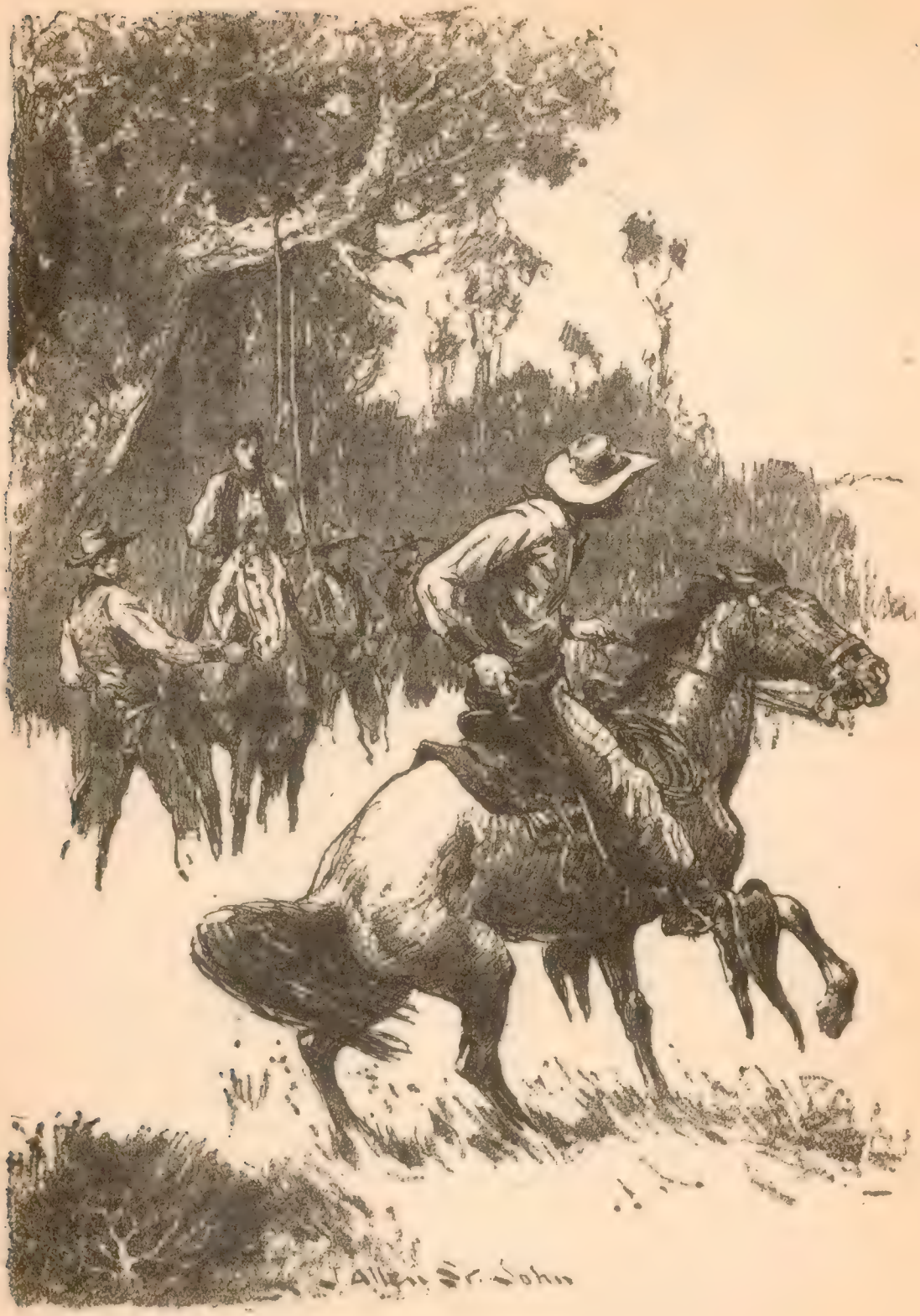
"Want a job, Lefty?" Jack asked. "I could use a good man. You know, Lefty, I was raised in this country, but I haven't got one even half-way good friend here. I could use a good man that I could put my hand on when I wanted him."

"You've hired one," Lefty said.

"See you at the ranch, Hugh," Jack said and he and Lefty galloped off, without as much as saying go to hell or kiss my foot or anything. He left me there in the trail rubbing my head, with five or six of the boys. And every single one of them had that "Well, I'll be damned" look in their eyes, too.

"Can that jigger really be Jack Hamlin?" Shorty McGuire asked, sorta to himself and sorta out loud.

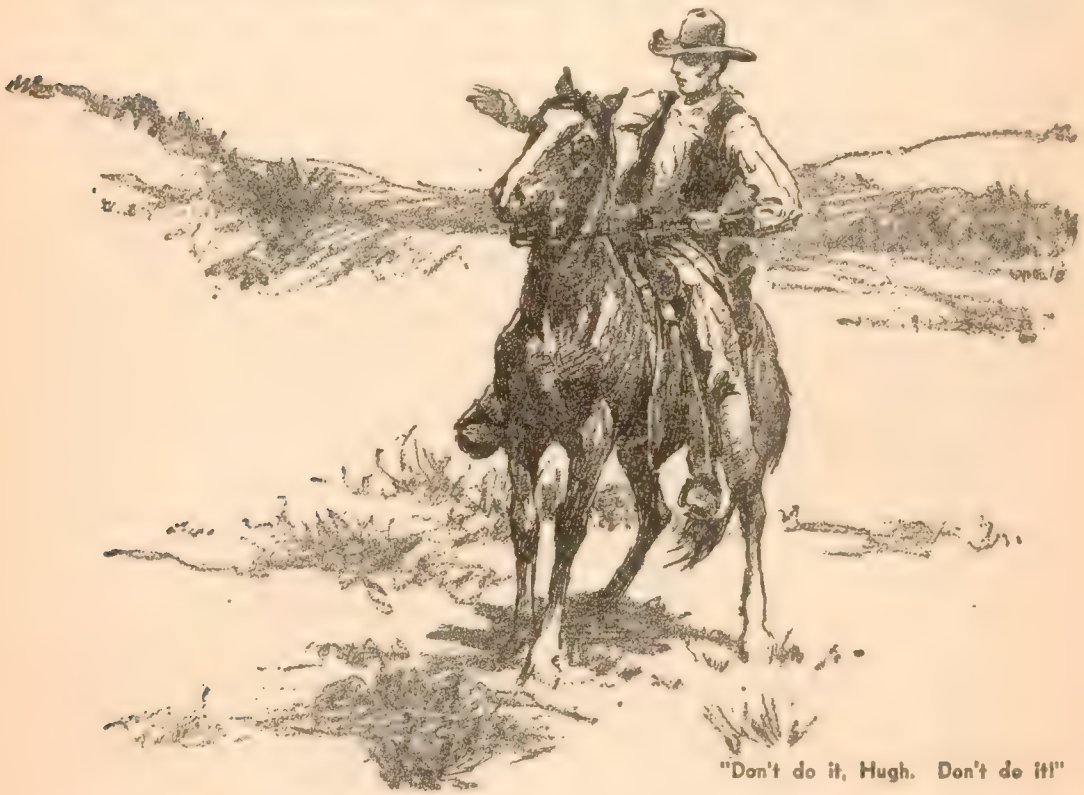
"It looks like the dirty son, all right," Bert Wilson answered him. "But he musta started drinking fighting whiskey instead of cooking


J. Allen St. John

whiskey—he sure come back with compelling ways."

"Yea, he did," Shorty said, shaking his head. "He never was nothing to be particularly scared of! How come us all to knuckle down that way and say Uncle, anyways?"

Yes, sir—Young Jack Hamlin had come home all grown up, the boss of his spread, whether we liked it or not. If I hadn't been so blamed upset over a hanging, and so relieved at not having to do it—I might have seen that something was different about him. I might have added it all up sooner and saved a lot of trouble later on. But when you get as old as I am you think you know it all and you stop thinking.



"Don't do it, Hugh. Don't do it!"

CHAPTER V

THIS guy we didn't have to hang after all, Lefty Allen, was down at the cookshack when I got to the ranch that evening, chinning with Old Hennery the cook. Old Hennery was a queer duck—stayed half drunk on potato whiskey all the time. He was the champion liar of seven states, to hear him tell it—but he was a mighty good cook and we put up with his drinking and lying.

Old Hennery seldom took up with any of the boys—he had a cook's contempt for cowhands—he fed 'em good and fixed 'em snacks when they came in late and all—but he never was a man to get right chummy with a cowhand. So when I saw him and Lefty hitting it off right from scratch I decided that there must be more to this Lefty than met the eye. I eased up and listened a spell.

"Couldn't spare a match, could you, old timer?" Lefty was asking him.

"Stranger, I ain't got no matches,"

Old Hennery told him. "Get you a light out of the stove. Hell, I ain't used a match in forty-one years. If I want a fire I just load the kindling in the stove, pour on a little kerosene and start cussing. It ain't failed yet."

"Pardner," said Lefty, "I always did admire a good cusser. Don't never make any doughnuts, do you?"

"Yea, I have been known to whip up a batch now and then," Old Hennery answered. "You a conny sewer of doughnuts, stranger?"

"No, not exactly—but I used to help the cook down home some when he was making doughnuts," Lefty told him. "Tell you what—next time you make doughnuts don't go to the trouble of punching the holes in 'em. Just make 'em solid and when they're done, holler for me. I'll come down and shoot the holes in 'em for you. You just throw 'em up in the air and I'll ream 'em out for you. I've been known to get eight or ten in one shot. That is, if it's a still day and there ain't no wind. Don't average over five or six on windy days."

"Set and have a cup of coffee, stranger," Old Hennery said to Lefty. That was Old Hennery's stamp of approval. Anybody that he asked to set and have a cup of coffee graded up high in his opinion.

"Don't care if I do," Lefty told him. "Jack went on up to the house," he said over his shoulder to me. Must have had ears like a cat to have heard me sneak up on 'em. "Jack said he was all wore out. Been in the saddle two days. Said he'd see you in the morning."

"Thanks, Lefty. Better put your stuff in the bunkhouse," I told him. "Take any bunk that ain't being used. Don't reckon you'll get any cordial welcome, but you look like you can take care of yourself in average company anyways."

"Yea, I can get along. Hope the welcome ain't too warm, though," Lefty told me, shouldering his stuff and starting for the bunkhouse. "Never did like to have no big fuss made over me."

I ATE a snack that Old Hennery set out for me and went up to the foreman's house and pulled my boots off to do a little serious thinking. Funny, how a man thinks better with his boots off and his feet up in the air. I uncorked the Old Crow and had a good stiff slug to clear the cobwebs out of my thinking apparatus—and got to wondering about what had happened to Young Jack Hamlin and why I didn't hate him half as much as I thought I did!

Hell's fire—I'd been hating that jigger for nearly two years! There were times when I could have strangled him cheerfully with my bare hands. Yet here he was back again—and I didn't seem to have any hard feelings for him at all. Just a little curiosity about what he'd been and what he'd been doing. And a sneaking admiration for the way he'd stopped the hanging and made half a dozen of us like it!

The more I got to thinking about it, the more I kinda liked him. He'd sure got his growth, wherever he'd been and whatever he'd been. He sure handled us that day. There was no need for six of us to have knuckled down to him, but we had—and liked it. Yes, sir, I was beginning to get a sneaking liking for Young Jack Hamlin. There was something powerfully compelling about him—something that hadn't been there when he went away two years before!

And the guts of him—hiring the jasper we were hanging—practically cramming him down our throats! Hell, it took a guy that had confidence in

himself to run a whizzer like that. Yes, sir, Young Jack Hamlin had sure changed in the last two years. I went to sleep thinking that somehow, out of the wreck he used to be, Jack Hamlin had turned into a man. A hard man! Things that happened next day bore out my judgment.

Young Jack came down to the cook-shack for breakfast next morning, all shaved up, with a clean shirt on, and those two black-handled forty-fours strapped low on his legs. He said, "Hello, Hugh. Good morning, boys!"

"Morning, Jack," I answered—but the boys went right on eating, not saying a word. Old Hennery was the only one that seemed to have any use for him.

"Hello, you young side winder," Old Hennery bellowed at him as he laid out another plate of steak and eggs. "Thought you would have drunk yourself to death by now!"

"You still around, you old fossil?" Jack asked him. "Shucks, you'd 'a' thought they would have drowned you a long time back and got them a man that could cook!"

"Ain't heard nobody complain about the food," Old Hennery came back at him. "Not more than three, four times a day. There ain't nobody around here spunky enough to raise hell about it!"

SHORTY McGUIRE and Bert Wilson butted in about then. They weren't through eating, but they put down their knives anyways and got up, ready to leave.

"Sure smells in here," Shorty said to Bert.

"Sure does." Bert answered. "You'd think Old Hennery would keep the place cleaner, wouldn't you?"

"He does his best," Shorty said. "But he's getting right old and he's right busy—he can't watch all the time. He can't help what strays in here."

It struck Young Jack as being kinda funny. He laughed right out—big and loud—and got up and unbuckled his guns and hung 'em over the back of a chair. He said, "If any of you sanctimonious sons"— only he didn't say just sons—"if any of you sanctimonious sons think you're too damned pure to eat with me, come on outside and I'll take you all on at once. Any man that can't throw the two of you in the watering trough deserves to be stomped good. Hell—I'll even go farther than that—if I can't knock your heads together I'll leave the country when I heal up!"

"Sounds all right to me," Shorty said. "We ain't aiming to kill you outright or nothing. Just want to break a few arms and legs and things like that. Hugh," he said, turning to me, "me and Bert we done resigned. You reckon you could see your way clear to pay us off when we get this little chore done?"

"Go ahead and pay 'em, Hugh," Jack told me. "They won't be worth keeping when I get through cracking their heads together, anyways. Better keep 'em around a couple of days, though—can't just turn cripples out to starve."

Shorty kinda perked up a little, and looked Jack over, just like he hadn't seen him before. Shorty said, "Shucks, if you can act as big as you talk, I'll say Uncle, by golly, and ask for my job back."

"Sure," echoed Bert Wilson, "if you can tame a wildcat like me and a case of dynamite like Shorty—well, I'll believe anything can happen. I'd even go so far as to say I'd work for you without a clothespin on my nose."

"Well, fire when ready, boys," Jack said—and the ball opened. Young Jack must have learned a lot about rough and tumble fighting while he was away.

He'd never been anything more than strong and willing when he went away—but he sure gave those boys a lesson that morning!

Shorty cut loose with a swing that started from the ground and caught Young Jack on the chin—but Jack rode with it and it didn't hurt him any. He seemed to stumble and fell flat on his back. Shorty let out a "Wahoo" that scared the stock three counties away and made a dive at Jack—only to get a pair of boots in his belly. A good old rough and tumble trick. Those boots lifted Shorty high in the air, pitched him over Jack's head and dumped him hard on his own head—out like a light!

BERT came in more cautious like, seeing himself without support. He kinda boxed around a little and felt Jack out. Jack danced around a little and backed away until he was right in front of the watering trough, with Bert facing it. You could see him sorta measuring things off. Out of the corner of his eye. Bert saw him, too, and got a little panicky, and let down his guard long enough to catch a left hook on the jaw and a right in the belly that put him out on his feet! Then Jack got one of those flying mares on Bert and heaved him clear over his head, plop, in the watering trough. Jack dragged Shorty over to the trough, dumped him in, too, and went back in to finish his breakfast.

"Neat work, boss," said Lefty Allen who had turned up for the finish. Lefty had shaved and combed his hair and shined his boots and didn't look near the down-and-outer he had the day before. "Never did like to see a man fool around and waste his strength. Guess a little work-out like that does whet an appetite. Any orders for the day, boss?"

"Yeah, Lefty—we got some work cut out for us. Better lay in a good breakfast. Directly you've finished we'll have to put our heads together and do something about those rustlers that have been worrying Hugh. When a man gets his age rustlers are apt to set him off into a stroke or something—so we better get in the saddle and put a stop to this petty thievery." Jack told all this to Lefty just like he was saying they'd better go to town and get a couple sacks of tobacco—just like he and Lefty could say "boo" and scare the rustlers out of the country.

"Got any ideas, Hugh?" Jack asked me. "We ought to have a little idea or two, just to start with."

"Well," I said and laughed. I couldn't help myself. "Yesterday I had some ideas, but you came along and changed them for me. I still got some, but maybe we better see if Lefty can shed a little light on the subject first."

"Lefty, start shedding," Young Jack told him.

"Boss, was I to tell you the truth you wouldn't believe me—so what's the use of wasting my breath?" Lefty asked.

"Try it and see," Young Jack said. "Can't see that you've got anything to lose."

"Nope, guess I haven't," Lefty said, his eyes sorta twinkling. "Well, here goes. I wouldn't want to go back to Wyoming, I've got to stay right obscure in Montana—and Utah don't love me none. Four days ago I shot a gambler in El Paso and got out of the state three jumps ahead of his friends. But as far as the territory of New Mexico is concerned I'm a virgin! The steer I didn't steal yesterday was my maiden voyage in New Mexico. I ain't had no part in any stealing that's been done in these parts."

"That sounds straight to me, Jack," I surprised myself by saying. What the hell was happening to me, I wondered,

taking sides with an admitted thief? "After all, I've never seen this jigger before—and anyways I know as well as I know my own name who's getting our stock. I can't prove it, but I know!"

"It couldn't, by any chance, be my old friend Frank Reilly, could it, Hugh?" Jack asked.

"Well, he's got a little too big for his britches here lately, Jack. He's got about twice as many punchers as he needs—and none of them are lilies, either. They're all tough as hell and they're all gun-men, or I'm a monkey's uncle. Frank's been marketing more stock than he raises. Stud Markham tipped me off, but he's just a cattle buyer and afraid to squawk about it."

"Have you got enough on him, Hugh, that we could go over and raise a stink and maybe not bring the law down on us?" Jack asked, with the kinda look in his eye that boys get the night before they are going fishing. That sorta I-can-hardly-wait-to-get-at-'em look!

"Yeah, it's him, Jack," I told him. "Frank Reilly may not be actually stealing your steers single handed, but he's having it done. He's at least bossing the job."

"Will you get me a horse saddled, Lefty?" Jack asked. "I'm going up to the house a minute—" he sorta hesitated, like he was on strange ground, "and see how Miss Sally is this morning."

I WENT on down to the corral with Lefty to saddle up, and I couldn't help noticing the horse Young Jack had ridden up on the day before. A big, rangy roan, wearing a Wyoming brand. A real horse, built for endurance—a horse a thousand miles from its home range. The saddle was a right good one, too—a hand-tooled Frazier, with "S.D." burnt on it. Young Jack must have put out a good price for 'em both, I thought.

Jack and Miss Sally were sitting on the porch when Lefty and I got up to the house with the horses. She was laughing—all happy and carefree—more like herself than I'd seen her in two long years. And Young Jack—well, he looked plain awe struck, just like he was seeing her for the first time and hadn't known how pretty she was going to be!

"Are you trying to play jokes on me, Uncle Hugh," she surprised me by asking, "hiring hands that look like my husband?"

So that's the way it was. She still wasn't quite right in her mind. She didn't know Young Jack. Maybe it was a good thing, I thought, and decided to humor her.

"He ain't no ordinary cowpuncher, Miss Sally," I told her, "he's a special man I've got to help me with the books and stay at the house nights to keep guard and all."

You could see her studying Young Jack like a buyer studying a steer—sizing him up with that speculative look that women always get when there's a strange man around.

"You know, Uncle Hugh—he'd look just a lot like Jack Hamlin if it wasn't for that scar on his cheek and for the tooth that's missing," she said. I hadn't noticed either of those things.

"And he talks like Jack Hamlin, too." She went on, sorta thinking out loud, sorting out things in her mind, hardly knowing that she was talking. "He's like Jack—but he's different somehow. If he was Jack Hamlin, I'd hate him, Uncle Hugh—and I don't hate this man at all. He's kinda nice, for a cowboy. What are we going to call you, stranger?" she turned and asked Jack, who was just standing there like the cat had got his tongue.

"Why, ma'am," said Young Jack,

playing up like a veteran. "You already got a Shorty and a Lefty—you might call me Skinny, or something like that, but I'd rather you didn't. I guess that Anonymous is a pretty good name. Yea, call me Anonymous—I kinda like that!"

"Anonymous it is," said Miss Sally, happy as a kid naming a pup. "Don't hold his looks against him, Uncle Hugh. He can't help who he looks like."

"Why, thank you, ma'am, for them kind words," Young Jack said. "Maybe one of these sunny afternoons you'd feel up to taking a little ride?"

"Yes, I would—I really would! I haven't taken a ride for a long, long time—but I'd like to. I'll go to bed early tonight and get good and rested—and we'll go tomorrow, Anonymous."

IT WAS just too much for me in one day! Miss Sally hadn't been out of the house for two years—and here she was getting as excited as a school girl over riding out with Young Jack Hamlin again. I never could figure women out.

"What is there about me that she shouldn't know me, Hugh?" Jack asked as we rode away from the house.

"Well, nothing I could put my finger on, Jack," I answered, not knowing just what it was myself. "As she said, you've got a scar and you've lost a tooth—but one good fight could do that for you."

"Yea, it could."

"She's still a little out of her mind, sometimes. Today is the first time I've seen her want to go anywheres since—" How I was saying this so calmly to the jigger that had caused all the trouble I couldn't understand. I'd always thought I'd wring Young Jack Hamlin's neck on sight, but here I was sort of apologizing to him for Miss Sally. Maybe I was beginning to take to this new hard-case Jack Hamlin and didn't know it yet.

"Where does this guy Frank Reilly hang out, Hugh?" Jack asked, just like he didn't know.

"Him? He still has his Moon-H over on Dry Creek. Got thirty or forty hands. Does most of his drinking over in Georgetown. Frank doesn't admit to it, but he's supposed to own the Crystal Palace, although Smoky Joe claims it's his. Frank will likely drop in with five or six of his boys before the mornin's out."

"Hell, it takes five or six bad men just to sharpen my teeth these days. Thought at first I'd ask you to go along and help out, but shucks—if there's only six you'd just be in the way. You might come along and play me a game of pool while we're waiting—Lefty don't have the look of a pool player, somehow. Don't look like he's ever been in one place long enough to learn."

"Boss, you're plumb clairvoyant, whatever that means," Lefty said.

"Guess I'd just as well go along for the ride," I told him. "Better let me get you a thirty-thirty. See you haven't got one on your saddle and you might want to shoot a coyote or something."

"No, I don't reckon I'll need a rifle, Hugh," Jack said—and the way he said it sounded like he didn't think much of rifle shooting. "Never did like to weigh down a good horse with something I didn't need. I'll borrow yours if I need one. Tell me about this Frank Reilly as we ride along. When did he get to be the big bad wolf in this neck of the woods? Thought you cleaned the wolves out when you caught Barney Goodwin."

So we headed out for Georgetown and I told him all the things that Frank Reilly had been doing the past two years. How he'd imported gunmen, got to lording it over his neighbors,

and all the things that were being laid at Frank Reilly's door. And I got out my tally book and showed him how our losses had been growing the past six months!

There we rode to Georgetown—the toughest town in the territory—over to Georgetown where they had no love for us or any honest men. Young Jack Hamlin—reformed drunkard, reborn waster of life, rifleman without his rifle! And me—Old Hugh McGovern, none too fast with the six shooter but reasonably accurate. And Lefty Allen the Unknown Quantity—the man we'd almost hanged the day before.

There we rode, the three of us—just a busted flush going up against a full house over in Frank Reilly's Crystal Palace! I wished I was to home and Jack Hamlin was to hell, as the old saying goes!"

CHAPTER VI

"WERE you aiming to get rich on that one steer you were lifting, Lefty," Young Jack asked as we rode along to Georgetown, "or were you figuring to build you up an iron with that one as a start?"

"Neither one, boss," Lefty answered. "It was on account of a horse kicked a nester over on Salt Creek."

"You don't say," said Jack.

"Yea, he was out of fresh meat," Lefty said.

"Never heard of a horse being out of fresh meat," I horned in. "Why didn't he eat the nester instead of kicking him, if he was hungry?"

"Maybe I better tell things the way they happened," Lefty said. "Ain't got no blackboard, but if you want to get off your horses I could maybe draw a picture in the sand. Anyways, I had to tear out of El Paso in a hurry, three or four days back—and travel hard and heavy. This nester family over on Salt Creek let me rest up there for a couple of days. Fed my horse for me and everything. A horse had kicked the old man and broke his leg—the old man's, not the horse's. The old man hadn't been able to get out at night and butcher him a steer lately, on account of his leg being broke—so I was sorta pinch-hitting for him, that's all. I didn't even know whose steer I was rustling—not that it would have made any difference. I just took the first one I come to."

"Tell you what we'll do, Lefty," Jack told him. "Just as soon as we get through horsing around over at Georgetown, we'll run one of Frank Reilly's steers down to the nester's place and butcher it for him. No use killing our own beef, but we got to pay up your debts, Lefty."

So we rode into Georgetown looking for trouble. Young Jack and Lefty looking forward to it with pleasure—and me with an uneasy feeling in my belly! The Crystal Palace was empty when we went in, except for the bartender. I had a double hooker of rye, figuring it might be my last, and Jack and Lefty each had a couple bottles of beer. Lefty got interested in the Police Gazette and Jack and I got settled down to a few games of pool.

Maybe Frank Reilly and his boys wouldn't show up, I kept thinking to myself. Maybe we'd miss 'em and stay all in one chunk for another day. I got so busy with my "maybes" that the first thing I knew Frank and five or six of his hands were lined up at the bar without me even seeing them come in. They laughed and joked and had a few drinks—and Young Jack never even let on that he knew they were there. Never looked up, never changed a muscle in his face—but he started missing easy shots—and it looked like he was get-

ting nervous to me.

YOU know how it is around a pool table—always jiggers looking over your shoulder, telling you how they'd play it if they were you. Four or five of Frank's boys came over to watch and advise—and finally Frank himself came over and looked on. Young Jack was missing set-ups right and left!

"Hell, pilgrim," Frank Reilly sneered, "if I couldn't play any better pool than you're playing I'd quit and start taking in washings for a living!"

"Well, Frank," Young Jack answered, "from what I've been hearing about you lately you could stand a good washing. Hear you've got to be quite the bad man in the last couple of years."

"Jack Hamlin! Well, I'll be damned!" Frank Reilly was one of the most surprised jiggers I'd ever seen. "Hell, I heard you were dead. Best piece of news I'd had in years. Might have known it was too good to be true. Folks hadn't ought to start stories like that."

"No, they oughtn't to, Frank. It's a shame to have to make 'em out liars that way."

"Well, cheer up, Jack—I doubt if they'll be liars for long."

"You know, Frank, you might be right," Jack told him, cool as a hog on ice, "but I don't see how it could matter much to you. Before that time comes you'll be either pushing up daisies or high-tailing it over the border!"

Frank looked the situation over. There he was with six gun-slingers and the bar man at his back, likely with a shotgun full of buckshot. There on the other side was Young Jack Hamlin who never could shoot for sour apples—and me, Old Hugh McGovern, probably too old to be much good in a fight. He hadn't seen Lefty, who was still buried in his Police Gazette over in the corner. Yes, sir, the odds looked good to Frank Reilly.

"You aren't hinting around gently that you intend to do anything rash or sudden, are you, Jack?" Frank asked, his hand on his gun.

"Yea, Frank, I am," Young Jack told him plainly. "A man don't mind having a few of his cattle stolen by a real bad man. That he can stand. But by a two-bit tough like you, that's different! You aren't a bad man, Frank—you never were. You just smell bad!"

That was all Frank could stand—his gun came out in a split second—but faster than that Jack's right caught Frank flush on the chin and knocked both Frank and his gun a winding. Jack batted Frank on the head with his gun a couple times, just for good luck, and to lay him out certain, I reckon.

"The bar keep's covered, boss," Lefty sang out.

"Thanks, Lefty," Jack said, "that's one I'd overlooked. Sure was afraid for a minute we were going to have to shoot somebody, Lefty. Never did like to do any shooting in a bar. Might break a mirror—and that's seven years' bad luck."

AND that, gentlemen, was the extent of the massacre I had expected in Georgetown that day. Not one of Frank Reilly's killers laid a hand on a gun. Not one of them made a move. I didn't know why, but they were bluffed out cold. They weren't yellow, any of them—but what they'd seen they didn't want to monkey with. They'd seen their boss baited into a draw, and they'd seen him knocked out and pistol whipped before he could thumb a hammer. They just didn't want any of it. They hardly even opened their mouths.

"Slick!" one of them said, and whistled in amazement. "Let's get out of here, boys."

Lefty collected their guns, and Jack took Frank by the slack of his pants and threw him out the door. Jack said, "Now you jiggers get the hell out of here and quit interrupting our pool game this way. And tell your boss, when he comes to, that if any of his riders get on our range, or any of our steers on his, that I'll come back and burn his two-bit town down around his ears."

Them gunmen threw Frank Reilly over a horse and lit out. We hung around a while and had a few more drinks just to rub it in a little. Then we loaded up the guns we'd collected, and Jack bought Miss Sally a box of candy at the general store and we headed back home. What I had thought was going to be an old-fashioned massacre had turned out hardly worse than a pink tea. Our busted flush had bluffed their full house! Or was it a busted flush? I wondered. Those hands of Frank Reilly's didn't look like they would bluff easy. But how had Young Jack Hamlin got to be hell on wheels? What was there about him that would scare out five or six gunslingers? I'm a right salty old buzzard, but even in my best days I never would have stood up to five or six men with just a good right cross to the chin as my only weapon. Young Jack must have learned to use a six-gun—that was the only thing I could figure out. Something must have happened to him to make him the buzz-saw he was that day in Georgetown.

I mulled it over in my mind as we rode home. Jack and Lefty rode a piece with me, and then they went off down to the south end of Frank Reilly's range, happy as two kids hooking the ice cream at a Sunday School picnic, to rustle one of Frank Reilly's steers for the nesters over on Salt Creek. They'd done that before.

THAT night after supper I listened in on the boys down at the bunkhouse for a while. They were trying to worm the story out of Lefty.

"Hear you had a little trouble today," Shorty said, giving Lefty a good opening if he wanted to talk.

"Me? Naw—that was yesterday," Lefty answered, whetting their appetites.

"Heard you had a little ruckus over to Georgetown," Shorty persisted.

"Nothing to it," Lefty said, "absolutely nothing. Just sat there and watched a pool game and read a magazine."

"Well," Bert Wilson horned in, "it musta been Old Hugh. He's been known to take a hand in things."

"Him?" Lefty shook his head. "He never even opened his trap. Never even said Boo."

"Well," said Shorty, "there's a rumor going around the grapevine that Frank Reilly and five or six of his hands got thrown out of the Crystal Palace. Likely it's just another one of them tales you hear. Things have got to where a fellow don't know what to believe any more."

"Oh, that?" Lefty asked, innocent as pie. "Oh, yea, I know what you mean, now. Why, Jack and Hugh was just having a little game of pool, and these jaspers were hanging around jostling Jack's pool stick. So he asked 'em polite would they go away. And they went. Wasn't no trouble to speak of."

"You aren't sitting there and telling us that Jack Hamlin threw five or six guys out of the Crystal Palace, are you?" Shorty asked.

"Gentlemen, I am," Lefty stated emphatically. "That's just what I'm telling you. Just like you'd throw a calf and tie him. All in the day's work, like. I'll tell you folks right now that I never saw your boss before yesterday

but I know a real hell-a-miler when I see one—and he's it. You guys may be good cowhands—I dunno, I never saw you before yesterday, either—but that Jack Hamlin's a real hard-case. It takes one tough *hombre* to recognize a tougher one—and that's why those gunslingers of Frank Reilly's backed off in a hurry today! They sang awful small while your boss was pistol whipping their boss."

"You mean to say that six of them just stood there and done nothing?" Roots Ansell wanted to know.

"Gentlemen, if any are present, that's just what they done—they stood there and they done nothing! They didn't want to tangle with no buzz-saw."

I should have smelled a rat right then and there—but I was too close to things—I couldn't see the forest for the trees. I should have known then that there was something fishy about Young Jack turning into a second Billy the Kid. But I couldn't see it then—and a lot of trouble came up before I did figure it all out.

I WENT on up to the house to tell Miss Sally good-night—and there was Young Jack picking out chords on the banjo and he and Miss Sally were singing, happy as a couple of kids. Something about Jeannie and her light brown hair—only Young Jack was singing "Sally and her jet black hair" and they were having a high old time of it.

"Sing it again, Anonymous," she told him, just like his singing was fit to listen to. "Sing it again, please."

His voice had got deeper, somehow, than I remembered it. Stronger, surer—with a little note running through it that sort of said, "I'm a fellow you can tie to. What I say I'll do, you can count on me doing. And God help anybody that tries to stop me."

It was sort of a comforting voice, I thought as I listened to Young Jack singing. Probably it wouldn't have won any prizes—but it made me feel good again. Made me feel that we had a man on the ranch again. Something in his voice just seemed to say that from now on the Jack-in-the-Box was going to be run right, come hell or high water!

I went on back to my room with my mind in an uproar, holding an argument with myself. One half was saying, "Well, this Young Jack is stacking up pretty good. He must be a good hand in spite of everything. Sure showed up good today." And the other half would answer, "Yea? People don't change like that. He was a drunkard and a killer once and he always will be. He never was any good and he never will be." And then the first half would say, "Well, he showed himself a real man today—folks sure stepped around lively when he got his back up." And the sour half said, "Yea—it must have been a mistake. They must have mistaken him for somebody else."

That went on for hours on end. I couldn't quite accept this new Jack Hamlin—but I didn't seem to hate him like I had been. Finally I reached for the Old Crow. To hell with everything—I had to get some sleep!

CHAPTER VII

FOLKS are funny, any way you take them. Two years before they had hounded Jack Hamlin out of the country for killing Harry Blake. But when the story got around that he had come home one day and twisted Frank Reilly's tail the next, folks thawed out right off the bat. They had been getting mighty tired of Frank lording it over everybody—but nobody had the guts to stand up to him. When Jack Hamlin

tamed him down a little Jack got to be the fair-haired boy almost over night.

Everybody wanted to shake Jack's hand and buy him a drink. It was "Howdy, Jack—glad to see you back, boy" everywhere he went. Yes, sir, Young Jack Hamlin was somebody in Grant County again after he'd cleaned Frank Reilly's plow for him.

Jack took it all with a grain of salt. "Beware him who has no ax to grind, or words to that effect," he said to me one morning. "You sure would think that out of all these gun-toters around here there would be one who could straighten things out, without egging me on to do it, Hugh."

"Yea, you would, Jack—but don't be too hard on folks. Frank Reilly has got him thirty to forty men behind him —and he's lined up with all the crooks and gamblers to boot. It makes a right big organization for one man, or one spread to buck."

"Who's ramrodding the gambling element these days, Hugh?" Jack asked.

"Monty Montgomery is still the kingpin, son," I told him. "But don't go monkeying with Monty—he's no babe in arms. He'll likely win your ranch from you and send you home without your pants."

"Pretty smooth card sharp, huh, Hugh?"

"No—I don't think he's so crooked, Jack. I think he's just too good a gambler and got too much money behind him for ordinary cowpunchers. Better steer clear of Monty, Jack."

"Shucks, Hugh—look what happened to Caesar and Napoleon and all those jiggers that had the world by the tail. Somebody always got to 'em one way or another."

"Yea, somebody did—but you ain't no British empire. What you want to monkey with Monty for, anyhow?"

"I didn't say I wanted to monkey with Monty—you told me I didn't, that's all. It would kinda be interesting though"— Jack let that run through his mind a bit and rolled a cigarette before he went on. "Remember that time we bumped into a bee tree, Hugh? How the bees came down on us in a bunch?"

"Yea—we sure got stung a plenty, son."

"Sure, we got stung a plenty—but we got a lot of honey out of that tree, too, didn't we?"

"All right, son—go pick a fight with Monty Montgomery if you're set on it," I told him, knowing he was up to something that fit into some scheme or other he had about stopping our troubles. "Better lay low a day or two, though. You just missed getting killed yesterday. Better wait until tomorrow at least. Just get into trouble every other day. That way it won't ever get chronic, like Old Crow does."

BUT Young Jack Hamlin wasn't one to take advice. I ran across him that very night, down at Monty Montgomery's place in Silver City. I'd ridden in to see if I couldn't sell Stud Markham a couple hundred steers for operating expenses. Always did figure it was better to sell a little stock than to pay the bank interest. Stud and I had supper and were sitting in Monty's Aztec Bar playing casino. We'd had six or eight drinks each and we were beginning to feel twenty years younger—when in walked Young Jack and Lefty, and my age went back up to normal.

Jack had never been much of a poker player. Oh, he got along all right with fellows he knew—cowpunchers and the other young squirts—but against old timers, well, he just wasn't in their league. When he got in a game with Cal Sims, who owned the Lazy J, Bill Clayton that ran the general store, Jerry Conlon who owned the freight line and

Monty Montgomery I knew I was going to enjoy watching Young Jack get taken down a peg.

Jack rocked along for an hour or so, winning a small pot now and then, just about making ante money. He got bluffed out a lot, and got caught in a few whizzers of his own—just played the trust in God sort of a game that most young bucks play. Finally he lost the hundred bucks he'd started with and dug down in his Levis and brought up a roll that would choke a horse. Must have been six or seven thousand in the wad he put on the table.

The sight of it made those old pirates' mouths water. They'd played a lot with each other and knew how to milk the fish, as the old saying goes. Nobody said a word—but they all let Young Jack win a few good-sized pots just to give him a taste of blood and get him a little reckless.

Young Jack had been watching Monty closely all evening—particularly when Monty was dealing—watching for cards off the bottom, I reckon. But on this big hand of the evening he just relaxed and looked at his own cards and then up at the ceiling.

Old Cal Sims had a pair of jacks, so he opened the pot for a hundred bucks, hoping to help them, I reckon. Bill Clayton raised it to five hundred, and Monty raised it a thousand more. That made it an even fifteen hundred bucks it would cost Young Jack just to stay and draw cards. Jack stalled around, kinda uncertain, with a far-away look in his eye, like he was trying to remember where he'd left his other pipe.

"Well, make up your mind, Big Time," Monty jeered at him. "It costs money to play in a man's game."

"So it does, Monty, so it does," Jack said shoving some money into the pot. "Raise you a thousand, just to be sociable."

THAT was a little stiff for Bill Clayton, so he dropped out. Cal Sims showed his openers and folded up, too. Monty saw the thousand and called for one card. Jack kept on studying his cards and looking up at the ceiling like he was listening to something, and finally said, "Stop that damned drumming on the table, Monty. It makes me nervous. I'll take one card, too." Monty had the habit of thumping on the table with his fingers, and I could see how it would maybe make a man nervous if he had twenty-five hundred dollars at stake.

"Table stakes, Monty?" Young Jack asked, eying Monty's pile—eight or ten thousand in all.

"Yea, that's the way we generally play," Monty told him. "Bet you five thousand more."

"Whew," Young Jack said, scratching his head like he was up a stump. "Making it pretty steep, aren't you, Monty?"

"If you don't want to risk your money, you shouldn't play poker, young fellow," Monty said, looking like the cat ready to gulp down the canary. He expected Jack to run from a bet like that—he'd drawn one card and could have filled a straight or a flush, or maybe made a full house if he'd drawn to two pairs.

"Hell, Monty—I'm not risking my money. It's a cinch. Let's see—twenty-five, twenty-six and five—I've an even thirty-one hundred bucks over five thousand. Raise you the thirty-one, Monty. Thirty-one hundred bucks says that my pair of jacks beats your busted straight!" Young Jack shoved his whole wad in the pot.

"Why, you young smart aleck," Monty said, mad as hops. "If I thought you'd worked in a crooked deck on me I'd drill you right here."

"Shucks, Monty, a man doesn't need

a crooked deck with wide-open players like you. You tinhorns ought to learn how to gamble, Monty," Young Jack said as cool as ice. "All evening, Monty, you've been drumming on the table with your fingers—and when you're drawing to a straight your fingers keep counting, one, two, three, four, over and over. And when you've filled your straights the drumming gets faster and smoother like a horse running. Come out to the bunkhouse some evening, Monty, and we'll give you a few lessons."

"No young squirt can talk to me like that and get away with it," Monty said, snaking a derringer out of his sleeve and leveling it across the table at Jack. "Teach me lessons, will you? Well, I'll teach you, by God!"

"That could be," Young Jack answered, filling his pipe as calm as if he was pulling his boots off after a hard day in the saddle. "It could be, Monty, but I doubt it. You hard guys are all over-rated." And just as calm as he was talking he flipped a handful of tobacco in Monty's face, dodged aside as the derringer went off—and let Monty have a beer bottle on the side of the head.

"BOSS," Lefty said, covering the crowd with his gun, "if you hadn't gone and done something when you did I would have bust a gut or something. I was getting nervouser than a chippy in church. Don't cut it so close the next time."

"Well, I'm glad we didn't have to do any shooting, Lefty—all these fancy mirrors around. We might have busted one and had seven years more bad luck. Any of you gents got anything to say about this?" Jack asked the men he'd been playing with.

"No, kid," Old Cal Sims said, "Monty sorta asked for what he got. But if I was you I'd collect my winnings and check out of here. Don't look much like nobody wanted to play any more anyhow."

"Thanks, Cal. Do something for you sometime."

"That's all right, son. Glad to oblige."

"Reckon you want to ride home with us, Hugh?" Jack asked me. Up to then he hadn't let on that he knew I was watching the game.

"Guess I'd just as well," I told him. "With a roll like that on you you ought to have a good man or two along just in case."

"That's an idea, Hugh. Seven thousand bucks is seven thousand bucks. It might bring quite a crowd out on the trail tonight. Come on, I'll buy a drink and then let's throw it in the saddle."

So we had a couple of quick ones and hit the trail for home—but nothing happened on the way but a lot of talk. Talk that set me wondering more and more. Young Jack rode along for quite a spell without saying a word, like he was mulling things over in his mind, and finally he asked me the damnedest question.

"Who else is there around here that I could get mad at me, Hugh?" he asked.

"Why, almost anybody, I reckon, if you tried."

"I mean big shots, Hugh—guys with backing. Men who have something."

"I don't quite get you, son," I told him, not knowing just what he was driving at.

"Well, look, Hugh—we've twisted Frank Reilly's tail a little. We've beat Monty at his own game. The cow-thieves and the gamblers have got it in for me now. I think we ought to make it unanimous, don't you, Lefty?" Jack asked.

"Yea, boss, there's nothing like having folks work together in harmony. Thataway, when everybody is gunning for you you won't go and make the mis-

take of thinking that somebody is your friend."

"Lefty, you've pronounced a parable or something," Jack said. "What other kind of crooks have we got around here that we could pick a fight with, Hugh?"

"WELL, son," I told him, "I dunno, hardly, unless you'd count the legal crooks, like old Judge Brennand. He's one of those smart jiggers that does all his stealing legal like. Buying up foreclosures and robbing poor dumb Mexicans and such."

"Shucks, Hugh, I can't go and poke an old buzzard like Brennand in the belly just for the hell of it," Jack said.

"Likely you won't have to, Jack—he comes out every month or so and tries to buy the ranch. You just keep your pants on and he'll be around and you can make him mad without poking him in the belly."

"Sounds all right, Hugh. We'll just sit tight and let the mountain come to us," Jack answered.

"Yea, guess that's the thing to do." I was beginning to get a little sleepy and was kinda tired of Jack Hamlin's wanting to pick a fight with the whole county. "While you're at it, why don't you make a clean sweep of it? Why don't you go and burn down the jail or steal the sheriff's star and get the law down on you. There ain't no use in doing a half-way job. Why not get the whole county down on you, including the law?"

"Hugh," Jack said, "you've got it! You've got it! If I can just get them to get the law—"

"Got what?" I asked, but he shut up like a clam and never another word could I get out of him about it all the way home. He just sat his horse and whistled about Jeannie and her light brown hair. Whistling soft and easy like a man does when he's thinking hard and don't even know he's whistling.

Why Young Jack Hamlin should be so pleased at the prospect of getting the law down on him I couldn't figure out. What had come over him, anyway, I wondered on the way home that night. And where had he learned to play poker? Who had taught him to wait and size things up and play his cards when he should? Hell, he'd always rushed right into things blind, before.

And where had he got that roll of bills he'd gone into the game with? He hadn't drawn any checks since he was back, he hadn't drawn out that much all the time he was gone—yet there he was with enough money to choke a right big horse! Must have had six or seven thousand dollars when he sat into that game. Where, I wondered, does a man get that much money honestly?

Anyway, as I started to tell you, Young Jack Hamlin was the fair-haired boy again in Grant County. He was back in the saddle, riding high in the people's favor. Beating Monty at his own game practically made Jack a tin god on wheels. Even the boys at the ranch began to think that maybe he wasn't all bad.

Things went along right smooth for a spell after that. The rustling stopped almost altogether. Miss Sally got better and better and began taking rides every day with Jack. Everything went along nice as pie—right up to the day Miss Sally got shot at and I found the reward notice in Jack Hamlin's war bag!

CHAPTER VIII

"WHO besides old Judge Brennand has been trying to buy the ranch, Hugh?" Jack asked me the next morning while we were sitting on the corral fence watching Roots Ansell top off a few bad horses.

"He's the only one, Jack—but he's been right persistent. He's been out here five or six times in the past six months or so." It was a fact—that old illegitimate wanted to buy the Jack-in-the-Box mighty bad. His last offer was downright tempting—just about twice what the place was worth.

"Got any inkling of what the old buzzard wants with the place, Hugh?" Jack asked.

"Well," I told him, "he claims some big Wyoming outfit wants some New Mexico range—but big outfits don't pay double prices. Generally they freeze you out for half of what your ranch is worth."

"Reason I asked," Jack said, "is that Brennand is about to inflict his presence on us. I can see his buggy a fogging up the road right now. How did an old pirate like him ever get to be a judge, anyway?"

"I don't rightly know, Jack," I answered. "Could be he is a good judge of liquor."

"Could be, Hugh. They tell me a quart a day is just a drop in the bucket for the Judge."

Judge Brennand had been the senior partner in Brennand and Norcop, some years before. They'd made quite a pile of money dealing in right-of-ways for the railroad, and Norcop had kinda got upstage after that. He finally went pure and joined the church and got himself elected district attorney on a clean-up Grant County platform. After that he was too blamed good to associate with an old skinflint like Brennand—so Brennand had to muddle along by himself. He sold a little insurance, handled a few law cases and did a lot of legal stealing on the side. Nobody had actually caught him robbing anybody's till, but everybody believed he'd steal the gold out of his own mother's teeth if he had the chance. Maybe Norcop did right to bust up with the old polecat at that.

I'd always kinda liked Norcop. He was a nice, clean-looking young fellow, quiet and well mannered. Even when he was campaigning for office he hadn't dug up the dirt that most politicians do. He'd done his best to get Young Jack Hamlin hung for killing Harry Blake, at a time when there was nothing I would have rather seen happen. Yea, I kinda liked Art Norcop, somehow.

Young Jack got up off the corral fence and walked up to the gate to open it for the Judge, just like he was visiting royalty. "Howdy, Judge, howdy," Jack said. "Come up to the house and have a drink."

"Don't care if I do, son, don't care if I do," the Judge said with the famous old New Mexican indifference.

"Have a chair on the porch, Judge," Jack invited him. "Rye or bourbon?"

"Either or both, son. Both of 'em have their virtues."

SO YOUNG Jack brought out a couple of bottles and some glasses and set them within reach of all. Judge Brennand said, "Heard by the grapevine that you were interested in selling out." The Judge rolled a taste of rye around on his tongue, smiled, and took a big snifter. Then he got right to the point without beating around the bush. "I've got a good deal lined up for you, son. Big Wyoming Cattle Corporation. They're ready to pay a top price for some good range down this way. Thought we might strike up a bargain."

"They want the stock, too, Judge?" Jack asked just like he was all anxious to sell.

"Either way you want, son," Brennand told him, pouring another three-finger slug of rye. "Either they'll take it off your hands or you can sell it to some cattle buyer. Likely you'd get

more by selling direct—this outfit has already got plenty cattle. It's range they want."

"Plenty of cheaper range in New Mexico than this, Judge."

"Yea, there is, plenty. But they want nothing but the best, Jack. Good grass, plenty water, plenty shelter for the winter. You've got just what they want right here and they're willing to pay handsome for it."

"Cash or time, Judge?" Young Jack asked, winking at me to let me know he wasn't none too serious. I was beginning to think maybe he was interested and I reckon the worry was showing on my face.

"Any way you like, son, any way you like," the Judge said. "They're reasonable folks to deal with. Got lots of money. Willing to pay cash on the barrel head if you want it that way."

"You wouldn't mind telling me what big outfit it is, would you, Judge?" Jack asked. "I'm kinda attached to the old place. Wouldn't want to let it go to just anybody."

"Well, you know how these real-estate deals are, Jack. Folks sorta like to keep their names quiet until the contracts are signed. But it's a mighty good outfit, mighty good."

"Yea, Judge, I trust you, too. Got any preliminary papers or anything you want signed?" Jack asked.

"Well, yea—I did bring a contract along in case we might do business. You just sign 'er up, and I'll get them to sign one, and then we'll get together and work out the deal."

YOUNG Jack took the contract from the Judge and studied it over a long, long time. You could see he was really up against a problem of some sort. He was frowning and biting down hard on his pipe and looking downright mean over it. Finally he made up his mind and said, soft and gentle, but still clipping off his words short, "Have another drink before you go, Judge?" and tore the contract slowly into little pieces.

"Why, wait a minute—you can't—what are you doing, young fellow? Why, I was told definitely that you were ready to sign up. Heard you'd sign up today and get it over with."

"Maybe I was, Judge, maybe I was—but was ain't is! So you can go back and tell whoever sent you that the Jack-in-the-Box ain't changing hands any time soon. Tell them to go plumb straight to hell, while you're doing it, will you, Judge?"

"Why, you young sprout, you'll be sorry for this!" The Judge was so mad he spluttered. "You'll be plenty sorry. You'll never get another offer like this one. You're sure you're sober and know what you're doing?"

"Judge," Jack said, "you're a better judge of that than I am. What do you think?"

"Why, you impertinent young—"

"Save it, Judge, save it." Jack looked at the Judge like he'd just as soon cut the Judge's throat right then and there, and the Judge got the idea right off. "Have another drink, Judge—and then get your bloated carcass off the place. First thing you know there'll be buzzards hanging around and they give me the willies."

"You'll regret this, Jack Hamlin. You'll be sorry about this as long as you live," Judge Brennand said, gulping a quick drink, hoisting himself in his buggy and whipping his horses until they were out of sight down the road.

"You know, Hugh," Young Jack said. "I think maybe I've been barking up the wrong tree. It wasn't Frank Reilly. It wasn't Monty Montgomery. There's the mistake right there I've been looking for."

"Don't know what you mean, son—

but there's no doubt about Judge Brennand being a mistake," I said. "What do you reckon the old buzzard has nosed out here on the Jack-in-the-Box?"

"Know anything about where to look for gold, Hugh?"

"Gold? I don't know anything about gold. You think there's gold on the place, Jack?"

"Could be, Hugh. I've a sneaking idea that Brennand, or somebody, has nosed out something on the place that's worth big money, and wants to buy the whole ranch to get it."

"What makes you believe that, son?" I asked, not much believing it, but still kinda curious.

"What was it Harry Blake said before he died, Hugh?"

"He said—'Don't do it, Jack, it's cold,' " I answered him.

"Could he have said—it's gold—and you heard him wrong, Hugh?" Jack asked.

"YEA—I guess it could, Jack. I could have heard him wrong. But what would that prove even if he had said gold?"

"Maybe Brennand had been trying to buy the place from him, even way back then. He could have been telling me not to sell out, couldn't he?"

"Could have, son. It's a hunch, anyway. How do we find out where the gold is, Jack?"

"You couldn't prove it by me," Jack said, scratching his head. "Reckon the best way to do would be to watch the guy that knows where it is. Sooner or later he's bound to do something that will lead us to it. Simple, huh?"

"You reckon I better hurry somebody into Silver City and see what the Judge does next, Jack?"

"That's an idea, Hugh. While he's there we'll have him keep an eye on Frank Reilly and Monty Montgomery's doings, too! Any of the boys got any business in town that won't attract too much attention?"

"Well—love has done come down on Roots again. He's right sweet on a waitress. Guess he could hang around her without folks getting all suspicious."

So I gave Roots a little drinking and eating money and sent him to Silver City to check on Judge Brennand. Roots is a close-mouthed jigger and I knew I could count on him to keep his business to himself. Hardly said boo unless he thought it over twice and thought boo was the thing to say.

When Roots had first come out to the Territory he went in to Bill Clayton's store to buy some peanuts. Roots had only had peanuts once before and didn't know what to call 'em. But he knew they grew in the ground so he asked for two-bits' worth of roots. He'd never forgotten the hurrahing he got and thought before he spoke most of the time after that. The name stuck with him, too! So I knew that if anybody on the ranch could keep his trap shut it was Roots. Two days later I got a letter from him by one of the boys.

Dere Hugh—

Hear is copy of telegram judge sent. That is all he has dun but drink. B-tter send more drinking money if you want me to watch the old tank any more. *John J. Ansell*

The telegram read:

GLAD CONNOR, DENVER COLORADO.
SLICK D'UBLECROSS. NO SALE. ADVISE.
BRENNAND

Who the hell was Glade Connor, and who got doublecrossed slick, I wondered. Looked like the whole business was just a bum steer and that the gold was another wild-goose chase.

But Young Jack Hamlin thought different when I showed him the Judge's telegram.

"The plot's thickening, Hugh," he said. "Yell at me early in the morning, will you? We've got a big day ahead of us tomorrow."

CHAPTER IX

I DIDN'T have to yell at Jack in the morning. He was having a cup of coffee with Old Hennery when I got down to breakfast. He said, "Good morning, Hugh."

"What's good about it?" I growled, feeling nine years older than God. "Winter coming on, rustlers getting our stock, old age creeping over me—what's so good about this particular morning?"

"Nothing wrong with you that five, six cups of coffee won't fix, Hugh," Jack said. "Trouble is you forget you're nigh on to ninety and go around acting like you were just sixty. Man your age can't ride all over the country at night and booze around and expect to feel like a three-year-old the next day."

We sat and talked a while and I lined my stomach with a couple quarts of coffee and a good bait of ham and eggs and I didn't feel half bad. "What's on your mind, son?" I asked Young Jack, remembering that he said it was going to be a big day:

"Cattle are selling pretty high, now, aren't they, Hugh?" he asked.

"Higher than they been in years, son."

"They generally go way down, after they've been way up, don't they? I haven't done much selling, but seems like that's the way it works!"

"Yea," I told him, "likely prices will be lower than a snake's belly next Spring—by Fall, anyways."

"I've been thinking, Hugh—we could fight these rustlers and maybe run 'em out of the country. We might keep our cattle and lose a few men—and next season we'd not get near as much for 'em as we can get right now. What do you say, Hugh—we sell every marketable head of stock we got now? We can restock next summer when everybody's broke and prices are way down?"

"Seems like an idea, son—but I hate to let a bunch of rustlers scare me out, even at a profit."

"Yea—I know how you feel, Hugh—but hell's going to pop around here. That telegram to Connor means trouble is in the wind. Connor is the frontpiece for one of the best organized bunch of crooks in Wyoming and Colorado—and Brennand is tied up with 'em somehow. They want this ranch—why I dunno—but they aren't gonna spare the horses getting it. I'm not a coward, Hugh—but I don't see the sense in putting up a big fight for a bunch of cattle that we can get more for now than we could after the fight's over. Let's get rid of 'em, Hugh—and put all our time in on beating these guys out of whatever they're after."

"I reckon we better do it son. I'll call in Shorty and get a wire off to Stud Markham and get him lined up to buy—and then we can start rounding them up."

"You do that, Hugh. Sooner the quicker. Reckon I'll take Lefty and run up to the north line and take a look-see. Might be we'll find some of Frank Reilly's hands up there and can have us a little outing."

SO HE rode off with Lefty and I called in the boys and had 'em start throwing all the stock down close in the valley along Lonesome River where they'd be handy to drive to the loading pens. It took 'em a week to ten days to get the hills combed and brand a few that had been missed—but inside of two weeks we had every saleable steer, cow and calf on the Jack-in-the-Box ready

for Stud Markham.

Stud was glad to get 'em—he knew a drop was coming, too—but he worked on a commission and the more he bought and resold, the more he made. He made more when cattle prices were soaring than he did when they were down.

All my life I've played my hunches—and most of the time they've been right. "Want this check made out to you—or the Jack-in-the-Box?" Stud had asked me. I don't know where I got the hunch—some sneaking suspicion in my mind, I guess. Maybe I still didn't quite trust Young Jack and didn't want him to run out and leave Miss Sally flat broke.

"Better make it out to me direct, Stud—then I can cash it in town and pay off a few bills and bank the rest," I said without thinking, just using the words this hunch put in my mouth. And, as things happened, it looked like my hunches were still working.

All the doctors I'd talked to had said the same thing about Miss Sally—that there was nothing they could do for her. Either she would get better or she wouldn't — all by herself. Medicine wouldn't help her any. The only cure would be the hair of the dog that bit her, another shock would set her mind right. None of them had said anything about a gradual recovery she was having since Young Jack Hamlin had returned. Guess doctors don't know it all.

It made me happier than seven hundred dollars to hear her singing around the house. And she and Young Jack got to riding out every day while the boys were rounding up the stock, just to see how things were going. She began to fill out, get a little tan again, and her mouth started in all over again to look like she'd just been eating strawberries. Of course, she had a few bad spells when she was out of her head and kept calling for Harry Blake and wanting to see her baby—but mostly she was her old self again, happy as a lark.

The only thing she didn't get right on was who Young Jack was. She'd hear me calling him by name, and that would make her as curious as all get-out. She really was sure that he wasn't Jack Hamlin.

"What's his real name, Uncle Hugh?" I hate to go on calling him Anonymous all the time," she'd ask me, or else, "Why do you keep trying to make me think that Anonymous is Jack Hamlin, Uncle Hugh? Sometimes I try real hard to believe that he is, and then I don't like him very much. But I don't hate him like I would if he really was Jack. He isn't, Uncle Hugh, I know! I knew Jack Hamlin inside out, and Anonymous isn't Jack. Anonymous doesn't know the things about me that Jack did, either. And Jack never was as kind and considerate as Anonymous is."

THIS was all kinda discouraging, I'll admit. We still had a long ways to go before we had Miss Sally well again—but Rome wasn't built in a day, and I knew that sooner or later we'd get her all lined out right. Sooner or later the past would be all forgotten and everybody would be happy—and in the meantime we were working all hands to get the cattle that Stud Markham had bought delivered before snowy weather set in.

It was a clear, windless December day—the day Miss Sally's horse got shot out from under her! I'd heard her talking over a ride with Jack, while I was smoking a pipeful after dinner. Always like to have a few puffs to settle my stomach after I eat. Miss Sally seemed right cheerful and clear-eyed, and she had eaten a dinner that would have foundered a horse. I heard her laughing and talking to Young Jack.

"You know, Anonymous, Uncle Hugh

really thinks you're my husband come back."

"He does, does he?" asked Young Jack, "Why, the old scoundrel. And who do you think I am?"

"I really don't know. You're not my husband—but I like to have you here," she said, sorta shy like. "We've had lots of fun together. And don't you worry—I won't tell on you. Everybody thinks I'm a little bit crazy and they wouldn't believe me if I said you weren't Jack, anyway."

"Well, don't you tell 'em, ma'am. They might up and get mad at me if you did. So don't you tell 'em."

"I don't think I will, Anonymous. They might send you away if they found out I was right, and I wouldn't want them to do that. I like to have you around, really I do. I like to sing with you and ride with you, and I can beat you playing checkers—but I guess you just let me do that."

"No, siree! You beat me fair and square every time."

"What are you really up to, I wonder? Why do you pretend you're Jack Hamlin? You aren't trying to steal his ranch, or hurt Uncle Hugh, are you?" This last she said more like she was saying something she knew was true than like she was asking a question.

"What do you think, ma'am?"

"I can't tell you how I know it," Miss Sally said, very serious, her eyes searching his like a man trying to find a place he knows on a map, "but somehow I know you aren't here to hurt anybody. Somehow I think you're here to help—but I don't know what. So I'm not going to tell Uncle Hugh about you any more. Some day you'll tell me who you are, won't you?"

"Tell you right now, if you like, Miss Sally. Give you two guesses. Either I'm Santa Claus on a vacation or I'm the man in the moon."

"Don't be silly. Let's see if Shorty has brought the horses and get out in the sun."

I DON'T know where they went riding, or what they did or talked about—but when Miss Sally came in a couple of hours later, at a dead run on the horse Jack had started out on—then I knew hell had broke loose in Georgia!

"Hurry, Uncle Hugh, hurry! They've got him cornered at Signal Rock. They shot my horse and he gave me his. Hurry up and save him, Uncle Hugh, hurry—" and she toppled off her horse in a faint.

Maria, the housekeeper, got her to bed in a hurry. I collected five or six of the boys that were holding the herd down on the river, and we hightailed it for Signal Rock. It was mighty near an hour's ride—but long before we got there I could hear the thirty-thirties plunking away and the deeper boom of a bigger gun, too. Thank God he's got a rifle, I thought, as we pounded along.

Young Jack was holed up behind Signal Rock, with a dead man beside him. His back was to the wall and he was fighting for his life when we rode up—but he didn't look at all unhappy about it. He'd got him a rifle somehow and was plugging away merrily at the dead man's friends up the valley a piece. My ears had told me right—it was a bigger gun than the thirty-thirties—it was an army Krag that would stop a bear at five hundred yards, and Jack was playing hell with those rustlers with it.

"Howdy, Hugh," said Young Jack, cool as ice. "Where you going in such a big hurry?"

"Oh, we heard there was a little ruckus up this way and thought maybe we could get in on it."

"Yea—well, what the hell you want to come along and spoil my party for,

just when I was having so much fun? You've plumb scared 'em away, Hugh. Sally all right?"

"I think she's going to be all right, Jack. What goes on here, anyway?" I asked.

"Hugh, the plot has thickened up right smart. We were just riding along, minding our own business, when—Wham—Sally's horse gets shot from under her. Another Wham and my hat goes sailing and I fell off and played as near dead as I could with ants crawling all over me. Sally wanted to stay, but I made her take my horse and beat it. Then this jigger came along." Jack pointed to the dead man. "Guess he wanted to rob the corpse, or something—but I managed to trade places with him. He had a right good rifle that I borrowed for a while. He didn't say I could, but shucks, it wasn't doing him any good."

"Yea—we heard you shooting some."

"Well, a man can't just sit around idle like. I had to do something until you got here—so I've been sniping away at the dead man's friends up the valley there. Just to keep busy until you boys got here, of course. Never was a man to sit around and do nothing. Then you boys come along and spoiled the party."

"Boss, you're all right," Shorty McGuire said. "You just take my horse and ride him on back. I'll double up with Bert. Any horse old and feeble enough for him to handle is bound to carry double without kicking up a ruckus."

"Thanks, Shorty, thanks," Young Jack said. "You know, Hugh, I have a sneaking idea that one or two of those jiggers out there are slightly dead. Do you reckon you could have the boys pile up a few rocks on 'em so the coyotes won't get 'em before the sheriff gets here? Think I'll ride on in and see how Miss Sally is doing."

SO HE rode off on Shorty's horse and we went out to collect the dead bushwhackers and heap a few rocks on 'em. I thought that rustlers ought to bury their own dead, but when we rode up there and looked it over, I can't say that I much blame them for hightailing it!

Gentlemen, instead of the "maybe one or two slightly dead" there were three of those illegitimates, and they were all dead! Yes, sir, I could understand why the live ones had left the burying until later.

"Judas Priest," Bert Wilson said, just plain awe struck. "That guy must be hell on wheels. Why—this looks like one of Old Hennery's windies."

"Sure does," said Shorty, the echo for a change. "But a man's bound to get worked up a mite when somebody takes a pot shot at his wife. Can't say as I blame him none."

"Guess you're right, Shorty," Bert said. "Burying is too good for these jiggers. Let's just let the coyotes have 'em and save the county the expense. Besides, it's hard work lugging them rocks around."

"Yes—it's hard work," Shorty answered, "but the boss said we gotta do it, so we gotta. From now on I'm taking orders and asking no questions. Looks like maybe we got us a boss, Bert."

"Shorty, it do look that way," Bert allowed. "Well, guess we'll never get through less'n we start."

So I left 'em piling up rocks on dead bushwhackers and rode on in to the ranch house, for I was getting kinda worried about Miss Sally, myself. It was about sundown when I got in and Miss Sally was sitting up in bed looking kinda peaked and quiet—but her eyes were sparkling like a couple of stars.

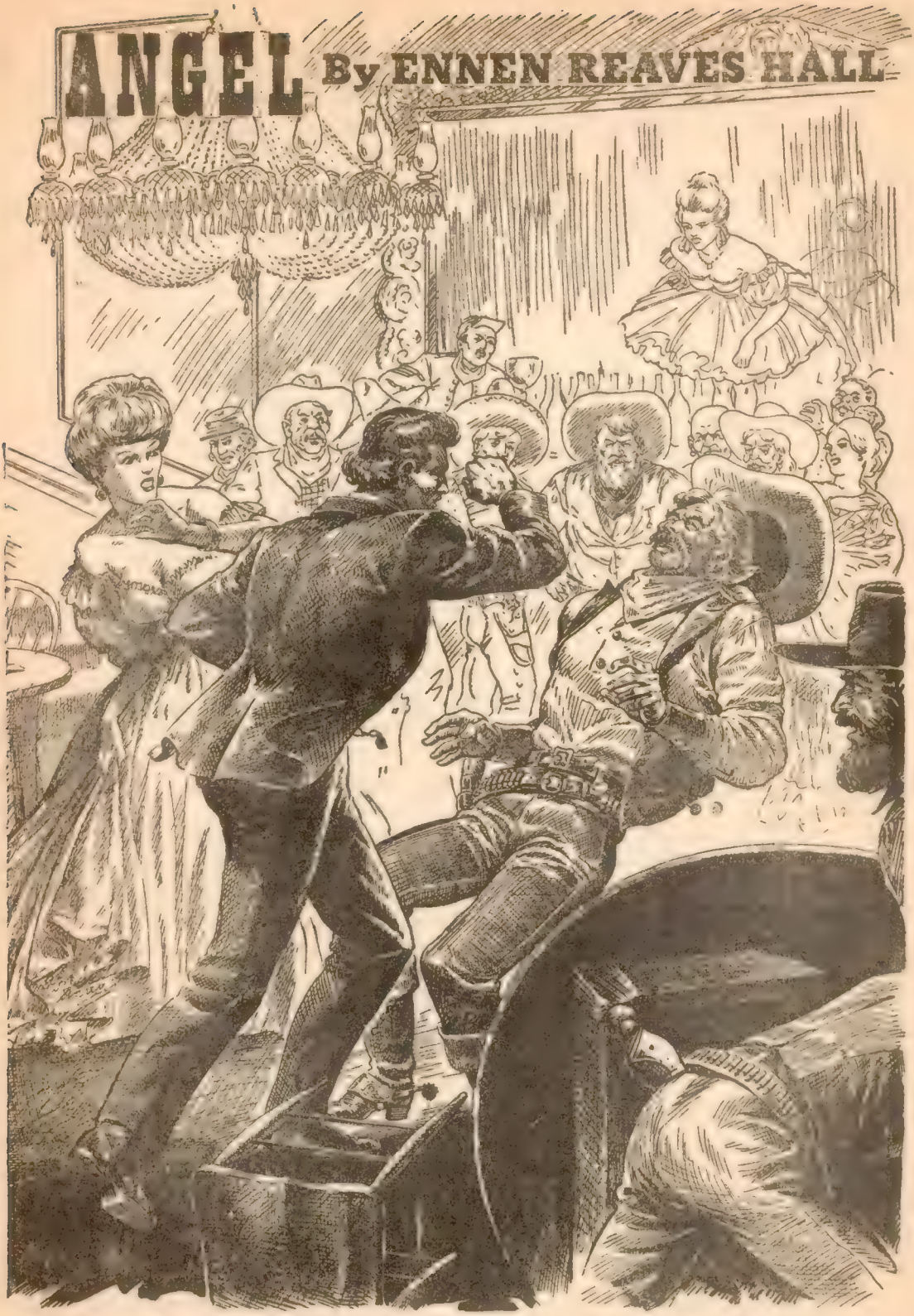
(Continued on page 114)

FRONTIER PRINTERS'

BLUE Eagle was no place for a woman—but Joel Madison didn't know Lane Winters was a woman when he sent for her

ANGEL

By ENNEN REAVES HALL



It was a beautiful blow—but Lane didn't see that! To her it meant only trouble

CHAPTER I

THE little box building looked just like all the other buildings in Blue Eagle, Indian Territory. Weathered and unpainted, and with a taller false front that gave it the appearance of being much larger than it was. The rain washed sign said "Choctaw Nation Advocate" so Lane Winters straightened her shoulders resolutely, gave her smart sailor hat a forward tilt, and turned in.

A cyclone met her at the door. A furious red-headed cyclone with blazing eyes and a voice like angry thunder. A short, paunchy man was backing up before those blazing eyes. Backed right into Lane without noticing.

"Get out!" the red-headed man was saying, his furious voice deeper, more carrying, than a shout. "Get out of here, Miller, and stay out! And I'm warning you not to come back unless you're itching for trouble."

He stopped short because the man he called Miller had scurried off like a frightened rat and there was no one left but Lane. He glared at her now exactly as though she had a part in his fight, whatever it was. And his voice was neither polite nor friendly as he snapped, "Well, who are you and what do you want?"

Lane recovered her poise and her sailor, knocked askew by the retreating Miller. She felt her own quick temper rising. This wasn't at all the kind of reception she wanted.

"I want to come in and talk to Joel Madison. And I don't want to get thrown out before I start."

Anger ran out of his face quickly, leaving it curiously empty. Even his smile was empty, she thought. No animosity, but no friendliness, either. Just nothing.

"I'm Joel Madison. And I don't throw everybody out. Just crooked spies with bribe money. Come in please."

Inside the small cluttered room Lane said, nervously, bracing herself for another explosion. "I'm Lane Winters, Mr. Madison. I've come to work for you."

The explosion came. "Holy smoke! A girl! Lane Winters a girl! Of all the brass I ever heard of this takes the cake!"

FOR a moment the blue eyes had blazed again. Then they cooled quickly to gray-blue steel, hard and suspicious.

"What's the idea, Miss Winters? What's your game, fooling me into sending you money to come out here?"

"The idea is a job." Lane spoke much more calmly than she felt. "A job I'm quite capable of doing, Mr. Madison. I worked in my father's print shop for years. And when I answered that advertisement you ran in the St. Louis paper I never told you I was a man."

"You knew I thought so," he accused. "That name . . ."

"It's the name my parents gave me," she broke in, hotly. "And because I was unfortunate enough to be born a woman is no reason why I can't turn out honest work."

He laughed, and the short, mirthless sound of it made Lane hate him. "Unfortunate?" he jeered. "With that face, Miss Winters? I've yet to meet a woman who considered it unfortunate to look like you. And I've certainly never met many in the Territory who are at all interested in honest work. If it was just work you wanted you could have found it much nearer civilization. Now, what did you come here for?"

Lane's hands itched to slap that cold, hard face. She was all the angrier be-

cause of a sense of guilt. Red burned fiercely in her cheeks and she knew she looked guilty because she felt guilty. She had, in an evasive way, misled Joel Madison as to her sex. She had known he wouldn't hire her if he knew she was a woman printer. And she had an urgent reason for wanting to get to the Indian Territory. But not a reason she was ready to tell this unfriendly, suspicious person.

She forced her voice to evenness. "I told you I came here to work. And that's what I'm going to do unless you prefer to lose the advance you made for my transportation. I can't repay it except in labor. And I see nothing the matter with a woman printer."

For a second she thought he was going to explode again. But though his eyes blazed his voice retained that forced calm.

"There's a lot the matter with it out here. This is a raw, new country, Miss Winters—a man's country, and fighting men at that. Women are in the way and we don't need them. Not until we get some law and order . . ."

"You'll get law and order quicker with the right kind of women to help," Lane broke in. "You've forgotten your history books, Mr. Madison, or you'd know that."

He made an impatient gesture. "Pretty theories don't fit into our kind of fights, Miss Winters. No more than pretty faces do."

Lane had all she could take. Anger surged hot in her and she no longer tried to hold it down. She stepped nearer Joel Madison, her smoke gray eyes shooting sparks.

"You can forget my face, Joel Madison. My looks don't need to concern you and the next remark you make like that you'll find out women can fight, too."

He laughed, and this time it was a genuine, wholesome sound. Almost before she realized it Lane was laughing with him. But he sobered quickly and his voice was clipped and cool again and she had the feeling that he was back on guard.

"I won't find it hard to forget your face, Miss Winters. But I'm afraid that won't be true of half a hundred other men in and around Blue Eagle."

"I can take care of myself," she told him, and calmly took off her hat. "What shall I do first, Mr. Madison?"

He yielded, but not gracefully. "Get out those history books and see how false they prove that boast to be," he snapped. "Any time a woman brags she can take care of herself you can expect to find her in trouble. But if you really want work I've got plenty. You can run me off a galley proof of this."

HE handed her a sheaf of scribbled copy, his face still registering his doubts. Lane set to work with confidence. She was on familiar ground in a print shop. That was why she had dared to come to this frontier land under false colors. She could give this man value received in honest, efficient work. The rest was her business.

By "the rest" she meant Harvey Colson. Harvey was her real reason for taking this job. He was the man she was going to marry some day. He was the man who had kissed her goodbye a year ago and told her, "I'll send for you soon, Lane darling. Just as soon as I get a start in the Territory I'll send for you and we'll be married. Just wait and trust me."

Lane had waited, while lonely days grew into months, the months into a year. She had never lost her trust in Harvey but she had grown worried. Something was wrong, she felt. The things he didn't say in his letters,

rather than what he did, all pointed to it. He no longer wrote of their reunion as being imminent, but spoke vaguely about it as "some day."

"Some day you'll understand, Lane dear. I've stumbled across a fortune and in a few years I can come back and give you everything your heart desires."

But what Lane Winters' heart desired was love. She wanted a part in this new life of Harvey's. Why should she wait amid the comforts of civilization while he endured alone the rigors and hardships of frontier life so that she could be assured a life of ease 'some day'? Lane Winters wasn't that kind of woman. But when she tried to tell Harvey that he wouldn't listen. Neither would her uncle, with whom she made her home. Nor would he hear of her taking a job. "A woman's place is in the home," he reminded her and he thought it made no difference that the home was his, and not Lane's.

Lane had other ideas. When she ran across an advertisement in the St. Louis paper saying the Choctaw Nation Advocate needed a printer-helper she had promptly written and asked for the job. And now here she was in the same town with Harvey, and with a job of her own. Provided, of course, that she could persuade this grouchy Joel Madison to keep her until Harvey was ready for their marriage.

A little tremor shook her at the thought of Harvey's nearness. What would he say when he saw her? What would he think of her boldness? She hadn't written him she was coming for fear he would ask her not to. Now that she was here she was more than a little nervous. Not only because of what Harvey might say or think, but of how she might feel herself when she saw him again. A year was so long, a girl could almost forget how a man looked, how his lips felt. Almost—but not quite.

WHILE her thoughts lingered about Harvey and their meeting so soon to be, Lane's nimble fingers were at work. It had been many months since she had set type but her hands were still quick and sure. Her father, disappointed that his only child had been a girl, had nevertheless made a companion of her, taught her his trade. At his death her uncle had taken over his shop and Lane had been promptly relegated to a life of dependence. And uselessness, she felt. So now joy surged through her to be at work again. It was like escaping from a prison.

But as she became interested in the copy she was setting even Harvey Colson was forgotten. And she began to understand Joel Madison's attitude better. For it was all there—the story of a wild, freedom-loving people who had been betrayed again and again and who had struck back in the only way they knew. It was an appeal for civilized law and order, but without graft and corruption and betrayal. It was a fiery attack against the railroads who were petitioning Congress for vast land grants through the Indian reservations. This, Madison claimed, would constitute another broken pledge to the Red Man.

Lane knew less than nothing about broken pledges to the Red Man. But before she was through setting up the flaming editorial she was a staunch sympathizer of the tribal peoples. And she felt a growing respect for this man who had the courage to fight for them.

He came over to stand beside her and there was a tautness in his voice as he asked, "What do you think of it?"

She raised shining eyes to meet his. "It's wonderful. It makes me want to

start doing something about it."

"Let's hope it has that effect on the politicians in Washington," he said, drily.

He was looking over the proof sheets. "You work fast. And clean. But even more important to me, Miss Winters, is to have some one I can trust."

"You can trust me," she began but he stopped her.

"I'll decide that for myself. And it won't take me long." His voice had chilled again and Lane felt rebuffed. I don't think I like him after all, she thought. He has ice water in his veins. But I can stand him until I meet Harvey and we decide what to do.

It grew dusk before she realized it. "Time to quit," he announced. "Where are you staying? We haven't much accommodations in Blue Eagle."

"The stage driver sent me to Mrs. Peel's. A nice enough room but an odd person."

He smiled and she liked him better. "Ma's all right—when she's sober. And when she's not she doesn't do anything worse than cry. But don't try to keep any secrets from her. She knows everything about everybody."

Lane couldn't resist saying, "Yes, I know. She told me I wouldn't like working for you."

"You won't. I don't have time to play gallant around my office and keep a woman flattered with attentions."

Anger surged up in Lane again and all the liking she had begun to feel for this gruff man fled.

"She was certainly right," she agreed. "I shan't like at all working for you. But I think I'll like working for the Choctaw people, the same as you're doing. So I'm staying, Mr. Madison."

"Perhaps. And now I'll walk to Ma Peel's with you. It's late."

She protested that it wasn't necessary, but he cut her short again.

"I'm the best judge of that. Out here, Miss Winters, there's two things that never fail to make trouble. One's whiskey, the other's a pretty woman. Men fight and kill each other over both. It won't be smart for you to go out alone after dark."

CHAPTER II

AN HOUR later Lane had forgotten Joel Madison in the excited anticipation of seeing Harvey Colson again. She stood before her mirror, dressing her golden curls carefully, adding a bright ribbon bow. She pinched her cheeks, wishing they didn't look quite so fragilely clear. Her smoky gray eyes danced with excitement as she turned slowly about to see the effect of the new ruffled dimity, with its tiny wasp waist and full, long skirt. Uncle Shad hadn't dreamed what he was buying that new dress for when he let her get it. Lane caught her breath sharply at the thought that it might even turn out to be her wedding dress! For very soon now she would see Harvey Colson again.

It was while they were eating supper that Lane had gotten the courage to ask Ma: "Ma Peel, do you know a man named Harvey Colson?"

Ma Peel was a grossly fat woman who moved with surprising quickness for one of her size. She had almost dropped her fork at Lane's question and the girl saw sudden, sharp suspicion in her eyes.

"And what if I do, young lady?"

Lane was taken back. Until that moment Ma had been kindness itself. And complacent good humor. So she hurried to say, "He's just an old friend of mine. I'd like to find him."

Ma's good humor returned instantly.

"Sure, honey. Everybody knows Harve Colson. He's the best faro dealer Steve Fisher's ever had at the Play Palace. But are you sure he's a friend of yours?"

"Of course." Lane had looked at her in surprise. "Why do you ask that?"

"Because you'll have trouble being friends with Joel Madison and Harve Colson both. I fear you'll find that a sharp fence to set on, young lady."

"I'm just working for Joel Madison, Ma. I don't think I even like him."

She had leaned forward eagerly. "Couldn't you and I go to this Fisher's place, Ma? I'd like to see Harvey again."

Ma had hesitated, but an eager light Lane didn't miss had come to her faded eyes. "Well, now, folks do go there. I can't see Steve Fisher objecting. But I doubt if you'd like it, Lane. And I know Joel Madison won't."

That had been enough to decide Lane. "Joel Madison doesn't own me. I can take care of myself. Go with me, will you, Ma?"

The big woman hadn't needed much persuasion, so now Lane was once more making herself beautiful for Harvey Colson, her heart beating high with happiness. This certainly beat sitting beside a fireside a thousand miles away waiting for a man. Don't wait, Lane, go get him, she thought whimsically and laughed a little at how shocking most people would find that to be. Including Uncle Shad. And likely Joel Madison.

THE door of the Play Palace was open invitingly and light streamed out. Music from a tuneless piano reached their ears and inside the long room Lane saw a few couples dancing. Rough men sat around tables playing cards, with money stacked in front of them. Empty, or half empty, glasses were everywhere, though there was no bar in sight. Liquor selling couldn't be done openly, she knew.

A hush so sudden it was louder than noise fell over the room as Lane and Ma entered. Even the pianist, a gray-headed, unkempt man, forgot his job and turned to stare, his music crashing into a jarring discord. Lane saw then how rough and common looking the few women present were.

She had a sudden horrible feeling that she shouldn't be there. But Ma was pushing her forward toward a tall, thin man in a frock coat and high celluloid collar who had left a table to come to meet them. Lane saw, too, a big man wearing a lawman's badge and felt somewhat reassured.

"Don't be scared, gal," Ma prompted. "They just ain't seen anything as pretty as you in a coon's age is all. And here's Steve Fisher himself. Steve, this is Miss Lane Winters. She's come to work for Joel Madison."

Steve Fisher was bowing and smiling, though Lane thought the smile didn't touch his sharp eyes. "Welcome to the Palace, Miss Winters. It's an honor to have you."

Lane let him lead her to a table, accepted the lemonade he brought her. All the time her eyes were roving about the room in search of Harvey. She'd leave as soon as she saw him, she thought nervously.

Then she saw him and her heart moved up into her throat. He was dealing cards at a far table and she thought he was even better looking than she remembered, with his smooth dark hair and foppish little mustache. She waited, but he seemed intent on his game.

She thought he must not have noticed her dramatic entrance. Then as

she watched his eyes flicked her way, as though against his will and she knew he was aware of her presence. But he made no sign of recognition.

She turned to find Ma gone, saw her lumbering toward a curtain in the rear, near the table where Harvey sat. Steve Fisher came back to sit down, asked her some stock question about what she thought of Blue Eagle. Still conscious of the curious eyes all about her Lane said, "I'm wondering what Blue Eagle thinks of me, Mr. Fisher."

"I'm Steve to my friends," he said, softly and she knew a sharp premonition that she wasn't going to like this too-suave man. "And I can't speak for Blue Eagle, Miss Winters, but I can tell you what I think. I think you're the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to us. It must have been a miracle brought you here."

Lane was fighting down her bitter disappointment and hurt. Another glance in Harvey's direction showed he had disappeared. It was incredulous that he wasn't rushing joyfully to meet her. But it was horribly true.

Pain and humiliation choked her voice as she replied to Steve Fisher. "No miracle," Mr. Fisher. "But perhaps a mistake."

"Steve," he reminded her, and the look in his eyes disturbed her. "And I'll do my best to change your mind about that, Lane. But what a queer name for a lovely lady like you."

Then he rose quickly and she heard him swear under his breath. "Excuse me, Lane. Here come trouble."

SHE looked toward the door and saw Joel Madison had come in. He looked very displeased and very determined and he headed straight for a table where a young Indian girl sat alone.

The girl had satiny copper-colored skin, lustrous black eyes and glossy black hair that hung in two thick braids to her waist. Except for a beaded head band and exquisitely beaded moccasins she was dressed as any other American girl might be. Lane thought she was very lovely and a sharp suspicion hit her. Could she be the real reason for Joel Madison's deep interest in the cause of the Indians?

Joel sat down by the girl and began talking. He seemed to be pleading with her. She listened stoically, shook her head silently. Fisher joined them and Lane knew he was ordering Madison to leave.

Joel jumped to his feet, red flaming in his face. His deep angry voice, more carrying than a shout, reached Lane.

"I'm not leaving unless Lahoma does, Fisher!"

Just then a man stopped beside Lane. He was very drunk, weaving unsteadily on his feet. She recognized the paunchy man Joel Madison had ordered from his office.

"Why didn't somebody tell me there was a lady as beautiful as you in Blue Eagle?" he demanded loudly. "Come on, sweetheart, let's dance."

Lane refused as politely as she could. He wouldn't listen. "Come on. Whatsa use being like that? Gus Miller's your friend, baby."

Over her protests he pulled her forcibly to her feet and out on the floor. His arms went around her and he pulled her close. Too close, so that Lane was pressed for a sickening second against his paunchy stomach, his flabby, loose mouth nauseatingly near hers.

"Let me go!" she gasped and jerked free just as an avalanche struck. A red headed avalanch, with blazing eyes.

Joel's fist caught Miller under the chin, lifted him straight into the air.

Then he crashed to the floor and lay there, breathing heavily.

Joel's hand was on Lane's arm then, propelling her toward the door. Steve Fisher blocked their way, eyes cold as steel. Lane saw his hand rested on the butt of the pearl handled gun he wore in a holster belt. His voice was still suavely soft but now it sent a cold chill through Lane.

"If the lady isn't ready to go I wouldn't hurry her if I were you, Madison."

Terrified at what she might have started Lane gasped, "I'm ready."

THE short walk to Ma's was made in silence. Lane knew Madison was furious with her. The heat of his anger seemed to fill the very air with electric sparks. When they reached the picket gate in front of the house he stopped and his eyes seemed stabbing at her through the darkness.

"Are you a fool—or worse? What were you doing at Steve Fisher's place alone . . ."

"I didn't go alone," Lane cried, defensively. Ma went with me. Besides, there was a man there I wanted to see . . ."

She stopped in confusion, remembering Harvey's strange reception. She couldn't admit now that she had gone to see him.

"A man!" Joel's voice was flat and hard and his hand closed on Lane's arm with a grip that hurt. "So I was right in thinking you had a reason for coming to Blue Eagle. They sent you here to spy on me! A pretty girl to do their dirty work! They figured you were beautiful enough to turn my head . . ."

His hand tightened on her arm and he suddenly pulled her closer. "And you are," he said, thickly. "You're enough to turn any man's head. If I wasn't on my guard . . ."

He stopped abruptly, swept her into his arms and before she could no more than gasp his lips were hard on hers. Hard and ruthless and strong. Yet strangely tender and sweet. Lane felt lost and helpless, as though swept along on a wild, rushing torrent that was carrying her into adventures both dangerous and glorious. Excitement stirred her—a reckless, thrilling excitement that drove out all thought of Harvey.

Then the kiss ended as abruptly as it had begun. Joel's arms dropped and he stepped back and his voice was a lash, cutting deep.

"Put that into your report, Lane Winters! It will give you something to tell!"

He was gone then. Lane stared after him, listening to the echoes of his quick steps, feeling he was walking right over her heart. She brushed hot tears from her cheeks and turned toward the house. Then she became aware that the echoing steps were growing louder and her heart quickened as she thought Joel was coming back. A figure took shape in the gloom.

"Lane, wait!" It was Harvey Colson's breathless voice and she didn't know whether she was glad or sorry. He hurried up and took her eagerly into his arms.

"Lane, what are you doing here? Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

His lips were searching for hers but Lane held back. "You didn't seem very glad to see me. You even pretended not to . . ."

"I couldn't believe it was you at first," he broke in. "And there was a man out back I had to see. When I got back in you were gone and I hurried right over here."

"How did you know where to find me?" Her heart cried out to believe him, in spite of her hurt.

"Ma told me, Lane; darling, you haven't kissed me yet."

SHE gave him her lips, and everything was all right again. Or almost right. Harvey loved her, she knew he did. He kissed her long and hungrily and his arms were hard, his lips demanding.

"Lane, darling sweet, it's been so long. And I've missed you so!"

Her heart gave a great lurch of joy. "Then we can be married right away, Harvey? I've been so lonely too."

She sensed his refusal before he spoke. "Not right away, darling. There are reasons why we must wait longer. You must trust me and do as I ask. You must go back to St. Louis. Tomorrow!"

Go back? But why, Harvey? Why can't I wait here, near you?"

"I can't let you stay in Blue Eagle." His voice was harsh with impatience. "It's no place for a young girl. You must trust me and go back."

And then suddenly nothing was right. They quarreled bitterly. Lane was willing to give him trust but she wanted trust in return. "Tell me one good reason for going back," she insisted, stubbornly, "and I will."

But Harvey offered no reasons that she thought good enough. He just demanded that she go because he asked it. In the end Lane had stormed out: "I won't take orders from you, Harvey Colson, before we're even married! I'm staying in Blue Eagle until I'm ready to leave!"

"You won't work for Joel Madison," he retorted, hotly. "I'll see that you don't work for him!"

Inside the dark house Lane threw herself onto the bed and cried her heart out. But her resolution not to leave grew stronger. She wouldn't go back and sit around Uncle Shad's house like a prisoner, eating the bread of charity. She would stay and make her own way. But could she? Would Joel Madison let her keep her job?

The thought of facing Joel again made her cheeks flame in the darkness. And sent a betraying thrill through her. She couldn't decide whether or not she liked him but she knew he challenged her interest in a way no other man had. He was so scornful and suspicious, so hard and indifferent . . . Or was all that a pose? Couldn't there be, under that hard exterior, the wistful heart of a lonely man? Lane knew she wanted terribly to find out. So now she had another reason for staying in Blue Eagle.

A long time later she heard Ma Peel come in. Then she heard dreadful sobs from the other room and remembered what Joel had said about her crying when she drank. Where had Ma gotten her liquor? Had it anything to do with their going to the Play Palace?

There were several questions Lane wanted answers to. She was determined she would stay in Blue Eagle until she found some of those answers.

CHAPTER III

JOEL looked up in surprise when she walked into the Advocate office the next morning.

"I thought you understood you were fired!"

"You can't fire a person without some reason. I just won't be fired." She took off her hat and hung it up. "And if you want to explode again just go ahead and do it."

He glared at her and bit his lips. "Then maybe we'd better get it straight who you're working for. If it's Miller and his crowd they'll have to pay you, not me."

"I don't know Miller and I don't want to. I don't want to work for you,

either, but I've got to have a job."

"You could try Steve Fisher," he said, dryly. "You seemed to be making a hit there last night."

"All right, I will!" She snatched her hat off the nail and jammed it on her head. "I have to have a job and I'll take what I can get." She started determinedly for the door.

"Hold on, Lane!" He jumped to his feet so quickly he almost overturned his chair. "Do you mean that—about needing a job?"

She didn't turn. She was horribly afraid he'd already seen the tears in her eyes. "I certainly do mean it. I'm a thousand miles from home and I won't go back. I simply won't go back no matter what Ha—, what anybody says."

He had caught her break. He asked abruptly, "Is Harvey Colson the reason you came out here? I saw him turning in at Ma's last night."

Lane was tired of evasion. "Yes," she said, simply. "We're engaged. But he wants me to go back . . ."

"And I think I know why," he said scornfully. "But do you, Lane?"

"Only that he's like you and thinks this country is too rough for women. He wants me to wait until things are better. But I want to stay and help make them better. It's as much my duty as yours and his."

"Oh, duty." He made an impatient gesture. "That's a word I hate. It isn't a sense of duty that makes a man want to help a weaker one who's taking an unfair beating. It's just a compelling desire to see fair play. And you either have it or you haven't. Harvey Colson hasn't it. If I thought you did . . ."

"How do you know I haven't?" she demanded, hotly. "You've almost broken your neck, jumping to a lot of conclusions about me. How about giving me some fair play? I don't know anything about your fights. But it seems to me nobody trusts anbody else."

"We don't," he admitted. "We can't afford to, with everbody throat cutting to get something for nothing. And the railroads flooding the country with spying agents and bribe givers. Gus Miller had just tried to buy my silence until this franchise went through when you came along yesterday. Him and Fisher are hand in glove, so when you said you went there to see a man last night I naturally thought you meant him. That was why it gave me great pleasure to knock him down."

He looked at her intently, as though searching her face for something. "I'm sorry about the way I acted last night, Lane." But there was a glint in his eyes that made his repentance doubtful and he added, softly, "But not very sorry."

Lane felt color flood her face. "I won't report it," she told him.

THE door opened just then and a man walked in. He was the big lawman Lane had noticed at the Fun Palace the night before. He stood there, teetering on the balls of his feet as though balancing himself to throw a bombshell.

"I'm arresting you, Madison. Reckon you'll have to ride to Ft. Smith with me."

Joel leaned back and smiled tolerantly. "What's the railroad crowd thought up now, Anderson?"

"Murder." The deputy marshall aimed carefully for the spittoon but didn't seem at all concerned that he missed. "Leastways, somebody thought it up and they say it was you. Gus Miller's body was found this morning with a bullet in his back, not twenty feet from Fisher's place.

"That's small loss," Joel said, calm-

ly. But Lane saw his mouth tighten and a muscle twitch in his cheek. "But why blame it on me?"

"Well, everybody knows you had two set-tos with him yesterday. And Fisher and Colson both swear you come to the Palace last night gunning for him. Steve says he warned you I was there and not to start anything. So you just knocked down Miller and left. They say you waited and got him when he left, outside. Steve says he heard the shot and saw you running toward your place. Reckon there ain't nothing for me to do but take you in to Ft. Smith and let Judge Cole ask you questions."

"Judge Cole does his hanging first and asks questions afterwards. You know that, Anderson. The railroads tell him what to ask and what not to."

Anderson shook his head dolefully. "I ain't got no choice, Madison. You been charged with killing an unarmed man and I got to take you in."

Joel laughed shortly. "If Miller was found unarmed it was the first time anybody ever saw him that way."

Lane could keep quiet no longer. "He was armed when I—when you struck him. I danced with him and I —saw the gun."

That wasn't exactly accurate. She hadn't really seen the gun but she had felt its cold hardness when Miller had pulled her close against him.

Anderson was unimpressed. "Reckon you're mistaken, Miss. He wasn't wearing it when we picked him up this morning. And I found it on his room dresser where he'd left it."

LANE bit her lips and was silent. But she knew she wasn't mistaken. She could still feel that hard bulk bruising her soft flesh. And Miller's holster buckle had been in plain sight.

Anderson said, sounding nervous, "Hope you ain't aiming to make me trouble, Joel?"

"No," Joel said, "I can't do that, Anderson. Not after the way I've been preaching law and order. But I'm going to ask a favor of you. Give me four or five hours to get things ready to leave."

Anderson scratched his head, eyes squinting in doubt. Then he agreed, somewhat reluctantly. "Reckon it won't make so much difference. It'll be cooler riding at night. But you're under arrest, Joel, so stay right here till I come after you."

"Thanks, Anderson. I'll be here when you come back."

The deputy shuffled out and Joel said, bitterly: "Seems we were wasting time arguing. I haven't got a job to give you."

"But, Joel! You're not going to let them do this to you, are you? I know you didn't shoot that man."

"Harve Colson and Steve Fisher say I did. How do you know I didn't, Lane?"

"I just know," she said. "But what can we do, Joel?" In her anxiety Lane wasn't conscious of the familiar way she had spoken until she saw the warm glow that came into his eyes. But all he said was:

"I'm going to get out that paper to send to Washington before I leave, if I'm not stopped. Want to help?"

In answer she took off her hat. "Shall I set type or run the press?"

He warned her softly, "Harvey Colson won't like it. He works for Fisher and does what Fisher says. And Fisher's a railroad man."

She just repeated her question, eyes steady on his face. "What shall I do first, Joel?"

He told her and they set to work. They worked feverishly, without pause. At noon he opened some tinned goods and boiled coffee hastily in the make-

shift kitchen behind the shop. She read proof while she ate. Not until the little sheet was finished, the bundles tied for sending on the stage, did they relax. Joel leaned back with a satisfied smile.

"Well, that's that. This may help to wake the people up to the need for a fairer proposal."

"What about you?" Lane asked, again. "Joel, I know you never killed that man. It might be an hour or more before Anderson comes. Why don't you just ride away?"

He shook his head. "You don't understand, Lane. That's probably what they'd like to see me do. That would put me outside the law from now on. And the Indians would lose faith in me because I'd broken my word. I'd rather take my chances in Ft. Smith. This may be just trumped up to get me out of town for a while. Fisher is pulling a fast one for reasons of his own."

HE GOT up and came over to rest his hands on her arms, forcing her to face him. Through the thin fabric of her shirt waist Lane could feel the warmth of his palms and little tingling currents of flame started racing through her veins.

"But what about you, Lane?" he asked, softly. "I don't believe you're Harvey Colson's kind. I don't believe you love him. Do you?"

Lane was trembling, feeling her world toppling about her. For hours she had forgotten there was such a person as Harvey Colson. Could she love him and still thrill to the touch of this man like this?

"I don't know," she said, miserably.

Then the little racing flames inside Lane had turned to raging fires as Joel swept her into his arms and claimed her lips again. And then she knew. For never had Harvey's kisses filled her with such a flood of ecstasy, such a mad whirling of her senses. She clung to him, thrilling to the rough tenderness of his mouth against hers, and wanted the moment to last forever.

But it ended, as all such moments do. When Joel raised his head, his arms dropping from about her waist, his eyes were bleak. His voice was bleak, too, and filled with a world of unutterable loneliness.

"That was for goodbye, Lane. Goodbye to me—and goodbye to Harvey Colson. For you can't tell me now you love him. You must go back to St. Louis and forget you ever knew either of us."

Lane felt like she'd had cold water dashed in her face. How could a man kiss a girl like that and say 'go back and forget me'? Then she fought down a hysterical desire to laugh. Or was it crying she wanted to do? It did seem that all Lane Winters' kisses stirred in a man was the desire to get rid of her. First Harvey, then Joel . . .

"Promise me you'll go back, Lane," Joel urged. "Blue Eagle is no place for you."

"No!" Lane whirled on him, mouth set stubbornly. "I won't go back! I wouldn't promise Harvey Colson that and I won't promise you. I'm going to stay here and help make Blue Eagle a place fit to live in. I'll take over your job, run the shop for you till you come back."

His eyes blazed at her again but there was no anger in them now. But pride and high hope, and something else that set Lane's heart beating to music.

"Knowing that, Lane, no prison walls can hold me long."

It was both a vow and a promise and Lane waited breathlessly for the feel of his arms about her again. But at that moment the door opened and Anderson came in.

CHAPTER IV

JOEL busied himself about his desk. "I'll be ready in a few minutes, Anderson." The lawman settled down in a chair and took out a huge plug of tobacco. "Take your time," he invited. "I ain't in such an all-fired hurry."

Lane went out to stand in troubled thought on the board walk. If only there was something to do to help clear Joel! It just wasn't right, forcing him to leave this way. But she had already learned about territorial law, or its lack of it. Anyone having a serious charge preferred against them must be tried before the federal judge at Ft. Smith. Whether or not Steve Fisher had killed Miller, he had been quick to use the crime as a means of ridding the town of its zealous editor. A daring idea came to Lane. Maybe she could outwit Fisher and gain some information that might guide her in the fight she was determined to make for Joel.

Remembering that disturbing look in Steve Fisher's eyes the night before Lane almost lost her courage. Her woman's intuition told her how to play her cards. But she knew she would have to do some magnificent bluffing. Since Fisher was nobody's fool there was small chance she could outwit him, but she could try. He had the answers she wanted to several questions. She started determinedly toward the Play Palace.

Across the dusty street Anderson had left the two horses, saddled and packed for the trip to Ft. Smith, ground hitched at the watering trough. There was no one in sight and on a sudden impulse Lane went over, fastened the reins of each bridle to the saddle horns and gave the animals each a sharp slap on their rumps. She saw them trot off and knew a malicious satisfaction.

"There, Mr. Marshal," she murmured, "that'll delay you a little while longer, anyway."

The Play Palace was almost deserted but Steve Fisher was there. He hurried to meet her, his face registering undisguised pleasure.

"Lane! Then you didn't leave? Harvey said you were going to."

"Harvey was wrong." Lane gave her dimples full play. "I like it in Blue Eagle, Mr. Fisher . . . Steve. If you hadn't sent my boss to jail I wouldn't think about leaving. As it is . . ." she shrugged prettily, "I may have to unless somebody thinks of something else."

"That ought not to be hard to fix," he said, softly. "Sit down, Lane, and I'll bring you a drink."

He placed a tall glass of lemonade before her and Lane pouted. "Is that the best you can do for a friend?"

He laughed and reminded her, "You're in the Indian Territory now. No hard liquors, you know."

"I was under the impression Ma Peel did a lot better last night," she dimpled. "Is she somebody special?"

"Not to me," he laughed, and she saw his guards were down. "But of course she might have had a special friend about."

Lane knew who he meant. She was remembering how quickly both Ma and Harvey had disappeared, how Harvey knew where to find her later.

"A handsome friend named Harvey?" she laughed.

"Could be. But I can see you're nobody's fool, Lane. You don't expect me to say so, do you?"

"Of course not, Steve." Lane fastened the provocative smile on her face with all the will power she had and added, softly: "No more than I'd expect you to admit killing Gus Miller

and charging Joel Madison with it. That was smart, Steve."

HIS eyes narrowed, studying her for a moment. Lane met the test of his scrutiny and saw she passed. For Fisher's sharp eyes began to burn avidly and his hand reached across the table to cover one of hers, his long white fingers groping.

"I can see you're smart, Lane. Smart and beautiful. That's a combination hard to beat and something I've been looking for a long time. Now that I've found you I'm not letting you get away. You know that, don't you?"

"But I'm engaged to Harvey. You know that, too, don't you?" she countered.

His laugh was low, full of confidence. "Teaming you with Harve Colson would be like teaming a thoroughbred with a burro. Forget Harve, Lane. He thinks he's going to get rich on this Indian deal but I'll make dollars to his cents. And I won't have to marry a squaw to do it."

Marry a squaw? Lane barely suppressed the gasp that rose to her lips. Was that what Harvey planned that he wanted her to leave Blue Eagle at once? To keep her from finding out . . . but why? Why?

Just in time she realized that Steve Fisher took for granted that she was in Harvey's full confidence. That she knew, and approved, of his plans, whatever they were. So far her bluff had worked. She must keep playing her cards that way. Her head was spinning dizzily but she held grimly to the pose she had assumed.

"I can see Harvey's no match for you, Steve. But he didn't say you were in on this. If I thought that . . ." She let her eyes and her smile give him the promise her lips didn't.

He fell into the trap. His fingers tightened on hers until it was all she could do to let her hand lay there, supine under his gripping fingers. His eyes glittered and his laugh had that confident ring again.

"I'll say I'm in. Way in. It's all my idea, in fact, having Harve marry Lahoma and become a Choctaw citizen to get his claim to the coal lands approved. It's my money we're going to use to start the mining company. Harve will pay off to me. Whatever I ask. Anytime he refuses I can send him to Ft. Smith and he wouldn't come back in a hurry, either. He's already hung himself with the rope I've furnished."

HIS eyes were so hard and calculating that Lane's flesh crawled. This man was deadly dangerous. He was using Harvey as a tool and so sure of his power that he dared boast of it to her. She felt violently ill at the thought of Harevy's part in such a vile conspiracy. But she had learned much in the past two days of the way of the white man in dealing with his red brother. She knew this was another instance of what Joel had called "cut-throating to get something for nothing." The thought of Joel steadied her. There was more she had to learn.

Fisher leaned across the table, his eyes as glittering bright as a snake's. "There's millions in this, Lane. Millions. That land is rich with coal and the new railroads will need coal. Nobody knows about it but Harve and me and Miller . . ." He stopped short and his laugh was ugly. "And Miller won't make us any more trouble about it."

Lane saw her cue and seized it. "Was Joel Madison making you trouble about it, too?"

Fisher growled, "That damn Injun lover was always making trouble about something. I think he's in love with the girl himself. He's tried to stop her

from being friendly with Harve. He don't know about the wedding tomorrow and we didn't want him to find out. We wanted Anderson out of the way, too, so we sent them off together. Smart, eh?"

"Very smart, Steve," Lane managed to say. Through her whirling senses one thought was knifing at her cruelly. Joel was in love with the lovely Indian girl, Lahoma! Then his kiss today hadn't meant what she'd thought it did . . . what she'd hoped it did. He was only trying to cut her loose from Harvey Colson, a man he didn't trust. To send her back to St. Louis before she was hurt too deeply by Harvey. And she had been so quick to think it meant more than that. Much more . . .

For a second she was wildly glad that Joel didn't know of this marriage tomorrow. Couldn't stop it . . . Then shame for such a thought flooded her. It was such a degrading scheme it should be revolting to any decent person. She must hurry and catch Joel and tell him of it before he left. Saying a swift prayer that those horses might have wandered a long way off she got to her feet, trying not to appear in a hurry.

Fisher got up, too, and came to rest hard hands on her shoulders. "When Steve Fisher wants anything he gets it," he said, tightly. "And I've decided I want you, Lane Winters. So remember that and start forgetting Harve Colson. It's me and you from now on."

The look in his eyes was frightening and revulsion seized Lane as he bent his head. He was going to kiss her and she couldn't stand that! She felt all her cool courage forsaking her and panic rising. The slamming of the door and footsteps saved her. Steve Fisher straightened up as a man came toward them.

The man was Harvey Colson and he was looking at them in angry suspicion. "Lane! What are you doing here? What does this mean?"

Fisher answered for her, his voice cool, half amused. Lane had the feeling he was enjoying the moment with sadistic pleasure.

"It means she's not leaving Blue Eagle, Harve. She's staying—with me."

HARVE'S face was a study of mixed emotions. Anger and bitter resentment—and fear. Fear of Steve Fisher. Lane wondered why she had never seen the weak lines in his face before, the marks of self indulgence. She felt she was looking at a stranger.

Harvey choked out, "I'm damned if she is! Lane, you can't do this!"

"Why can't I, Harvey? I hear you're getting married tomorrow."

"You told her that!" Harvey whirled on Steve, his hand darting swiftly toward the gun on his hip. For a second there was murder in his face but his anger ran out quickly as Steve's hand shot out and closed on his wrist.

"Hold it, Colson!" Steve's voice was like the flick of a bull whip. "I didn't tell her any more than she knew . . . Or maybe I did, at that." He laughed softly, looking at Lane. "She's a smart girl. But it don't matter, anyhow. Because I tell you it's me and her from now on. You'll have your pretty squaw so why should you object?"

Harvey looked like he might be going to cry, his face working horribly. "But you know what I'd planned about that! In a few months I can divorce her . . . Lane, you've got to wait for me!"

Lane felt she was going to be sick. She had to get out of there quickly. She started for the door.

"You're wrong, Harvey," she told him. "I've wasted a year already, wait-

ing for—nothing."

At the door Fisher overtook her, detained her for a second. "Come back tonight, darling. I'll look for you. And don't worry about Harve giving us trouble. He has some wedding presents to deliver."

Lane nodded at what had amounted to an order and hurried out. She forced her trembling feet to walk, though she wanted to run. And she prayed that Joel and Anderson might not be gone.

But the office was closed and locked. She was too late. Against the wall leaned a still figure and Lane saw it was the Indian girl, Lahoma. She looked at her questioningly.

"I wait for Joel," the girl said. "I must see him."

A jealous h a t r e d for this dark skinned girl filled Lane. She felt a fierce longing to strike her, to mar the calm beauty of her face. Then she saw the girl's eyes and saw trouble there and pity filled her. If this girl loved Harvey Colson she merited pity. So there was only gentleness in her voice as she told Lahoma: "Joel is gone. They've taken him to Ft. Smith. What did you want with him?"

There was tragedy in the dark eyes turned on Lane. "Joel is my friend. He would tell me what to do."

Compunction seized Lane. Hadn't she boasted to Joel that she would take over his job? This simple girl who trusted him, who perhaps he loved deeply, was a part of that job. She mustn't fail Joel now. She must find a way to save her from this degrading marriage.

There was nothing but sincerity in her heart or in her voice as she told Lahoma: "I am your friend, too. Tell me."

The girl hesitated and Lane thought she was going to turn away. Then she seemed to reach a sudden decision.

"My people make trouble when they have firewater. Tonight they bring my father many cases. For wedding present. If I could tell Joel, he stop it."

Her faith in Joel touched Lane. Somehow she must manage to live up to that faith. She was busily fitting pieces together, remembering Fisher saying Harve would be busy that night—delivering wedding presents.

The Indian girl's dark eyes were on her face, full of pleading. "You help me?"

"Yes," Lane promised, recklessly. "Lahoma, why are you marrying Harve Colson? Do you love him?"

The dark head shook slowly and in the eyes of the girl was written heart breaking unhappiness. "My heart is another's," she said in her quaint way. "But I love my father. He has helped Harvey sell whiskey. Unless I promise to marry they would send him to jail. But now I am afraid."

Raging anger shook Lane as the despicable plot unfolded. And shame that men of her race could stoop to such things for greed. She put a trembling hand on Lahoma's arm, drew her out of sight on one side of the building. "Quick, Lahoma. Tell me when and how this delivery is to be made."

CHAPTER V

IN A few short moments she had the story. Harvey had promised Lahoma's father, John Blackbird, a fine team and wagon as a wedding gift when he married Lahoma. The wagon bed would be filled with hay and grain for the horses, he'd said. By accident Lahoma had learned, when John started inviting the young men of his tribe to attend the wedding supper, that he expected to find much liquor buried in the grain. "Enough to make my people crazy," the troubled girl said.

Lane had heard of serious outbreaks among drink-crazed Indians. She knew it was one of the things Joel had been fighting against. And she knew that Lahoma had confided in her only because of her desperation. That the girl sensed a real and terrible danger. And she knew, too, that if she could prevent this liquor getting into the Indians' hands she might also prevent this marriage Harvey was forcing upon Lahoma. And save Joel, and give him his happiness. Her mind swiftly turned over plans.

"Lahoma, I want that wedding feast delayed a few hours. Could you manage to keep your father away from home so that the grain is not unloaded until much later in the evening? No harm will come to him, I promise you. And if all goes well you will not have to marry Harvey Colson."

The girl's eyes were luminous with new hope. "I'll find a way," she promised, and Lane felt she would.

A few minutes later Lane stormed into Ma Peel's like a whirlwind. The fat woman was rocking complacently, at peace with the world.

"Ma, you bought liquor last night from Harvey Colson, didn't you? I know you did, so don't deny it. Steve Fisher told me so."

"Then Steve's a liar." Ma's eyes had gone hard and suspicious. "Harve gave me a little nip for telling him about you. But you can't make any harm out of that, young lady."

"I don't want to make any trouble for you, Ma. But I know you've bought from him, you know where he keeps it at the Play Palace. Please come with me and back up my story by telling Marshal Anderson that. It will help stop trouble . . ."

"And it'll sure stop me from getting any more likker. What kind of fool you think I be, Lane?"

Lane beat her clenched fists together in frenzied impatience. "Listen, Ma. Harvey's taking a big load to Blackbird tonight, for his and Lahoma's wedding supper. They think Anderson and Joel are out of the way, on the road to Ft. Smith. But I don't think they've been gone long. Come with me, help me overtake them and talk Anderson into coming back. He'll have to listen to both of us."

Ma sat in thought for a moment. A moment agonizingly long to Lane. Then her big body shook with a heavy sigh and she heaved herself up from the chair.

"He'll listen," she said, grimly. "I sure hate not getting any more of Harve's likker but I hate getting scalped worse. If he takes as much as a case out to those gin crazy Redskins we're all liable to be hunting our hair by morning."

THE sun was nearly down when Lane and Ma started out in Ma's dilapidated buckboard, drawn by two horses almost as fat as she. Ma drove and urged the lazy animals to a new high speed for them but to Lane it seemed they were barely crawling. Darkness shut down and there was no sign of the men they sought and Lane was frantic. Ma remained optimistic.

"We'll catch 'em," she assured the nervous Lane. "It's quite a ride to Ft. Smith, nearly a hundred miles. No man with any sense would set a fast pace starting on a ride that long."

She proved to be right. Soon after dark Lane saw the two dim figures ahead and thankfulness welled up in her.

Lane poured out her story, Ma supporting her with additional facts. Anderson asked a few questions, then wheeled his horse. "Reckon Ft. Smith will keep and to my way of thinking

giving whiskey to the Injuns is a dang sight worse than killing Miller."

Lane didn't delay them by telling what she knew about that. There was no time for any talk with Joel either, except as he rode to her side of the buckboard and leaned from the saddle to say, quickly: "I was a fool, Lane, when I thought I couldn't trust you."

She was glad it was dark and he couldn't see the tears that filled her eyes as she answered, "I guess I like fair play, too, Joel."

The men spurred away then, back to Blue Eagle and the house of John Blackbird. Ma turned her team about and settled down to a slower gait. "Can't we go faster, Ma?" Lane begged.

"Can't see as there's any hurry now," the fat woman said. "When Steve Fisher finds out what we done we'll wish we'd gone tother way." And then she moaned softly. "And me with not even a drop of likker to console me."

Lane snatched the lines from her hands, laid the whip across the backs of the tired horses. "I'm in a hurry," she snapped. "Anything can be happening in Blue Eagle."

BUT there seemed to be nothing happening when they got back to Blue Eagle. Everything was still and dark, even the Play Palace. But a light shown from the Advocate office and Lane headed for there, ignoring Ma's protests. In front of it she thrust the lines into the other woman's hands and ran to the door.

The room was full of people, though at first Lane saw only Joel Madison. Saw he was unhurt and a great joy flooded her. Then she saw Lahoma and a sullen faced Indian who must be her father, Harvey Colson and Steve Fisher. Marshal Anderson guarded Colson and Fisher while the town doctor worked over a wound in Fisher's shoulder.

Seeing her in the doorway Anderson called out: "Caught Colson red handed, Miss Lane. But when we come in to get Fisher he made trouble and I had to plug him."

The cold calm of Steve Fisher broke. Rage flooded him and his face was suddenly a mask of fury. "So it was you who double crossed me, you white faced little snooper! Well, you've done your last talking!"

Before anyone could make a move he shoved the doctor aside, snatched the gun the deputy held and fired point blank at Lane.

Only one man anticipated that move quickly enough. Harvey Colson's anguished cry of "Look out, Lane!" came as one sound with the roar of the gun. And Harvey leaped as he yelled, throwing his body squarely in line with Fisher's fire.

Horror stricken, Lane saw Harvey crumple like a bundle of rags and slump to the floor. Anderson and the doctor threw themselves upon Fisher and this time handcuffs clicked, without regard for his injury.

The doctor made a quick examination of Harvey, then shook his head. Lane knelt beside him, tears streaming down her face. His eyes opened, fixed on her face hungrily.

"It was worth a try, Lane," he whispered. "We'd have been rich. Now you'll have to go back . . . " His eyes closed tiredly and his twitching body grew still. Harvey Colson was dead.

Gentle hands lifted Lane to her feet. "Don't let it hurt too much, Lane," Joel murmured. "He wasn't bad—just weak. In this country men either grow weaker or stronger. And the weak don't survive."

A lithe young Indian brave came in and touched Lahoma's arm. "We go

home now," Lane heard him say. Without a word Lahoma followed him out the door and her eyes were like great dusky stars. Old John Blackbird shuffled after them and the deputy let him go.

"We won't need to press the liquor charge," he said. "We've got two first class murder charges against Mr. Fisher here. If Judge Cole don't hang him for this I will."

Joel and Lane were looking after the Indians. "Who was he?" Lane asked concerning the young brave.

Joel smiled. "Looks like a wedding at John Blackbird's after all. That was what I wanted for Lahoma. You know she and I went to Mission School together when we were kids. She's a great girl, really."

"But I thought . . ." Lane stopped quickly. She had been wrong and how glad she was. She pressed closer to him and his arms were like sheltering walls, shutting out ugliness and danger. Shutting in love.

"Joel," she murmured, determined to wait no longer for what she wanted to hear, "I was able to help a little, wasn't I? Do you still think I'd be in the way if I stayed?"

A tender smile tugged at his mouth and his eyes were like the flickering flames of camp fires, warming her through and through.

"I've been thinking about those history books, Lane. Seems there have been women taking part in most big fights. I reckon we might use you."

Then all laughter left his face and his arms drew her close and his lips were hard on hers again.

"You've got yourself a job, Lane darling. A job for life."

CITY OF SILVER—AND BONES

THE mining towns, those centers of turbulent activity—both dishonest and otherwise—sprouted like mushrooms during the white man's Western advance. Tombstone, Arizona, sprung up over night. Its unusual name can be credited to the ingenuity of one, Edward Schieffelin.

Schieffelin's early personal history was typical of the youth of that era. Born in Pennsylvania, he had migrated when he was ten in the family covered wagon to California. The excitement of the Gold Rush of 1849 had not yet subsided and the youth busied himself with mining and prospecting.

In the fall of 1876 he was working in Arizona and took part in the campaign against the murderous Apache hordes. With Al Sieber and his men, he rode on that significant afternoon in May, 1877. A gleam of mineral stains on a stone caught Schieffelin's eye as he rode. He dismounted from his horse, noted the presence of silver in the piece of rock that had attracted his attention, dropped it into a pocket of his coat, and, climbing into the saddle, rode on after his comrades. Riding back to Fort Huachuca, thoughts of the possible value of his find kept racing through Schieffelin's head. It was a gamble, but he was willing to take it. The decision was made.

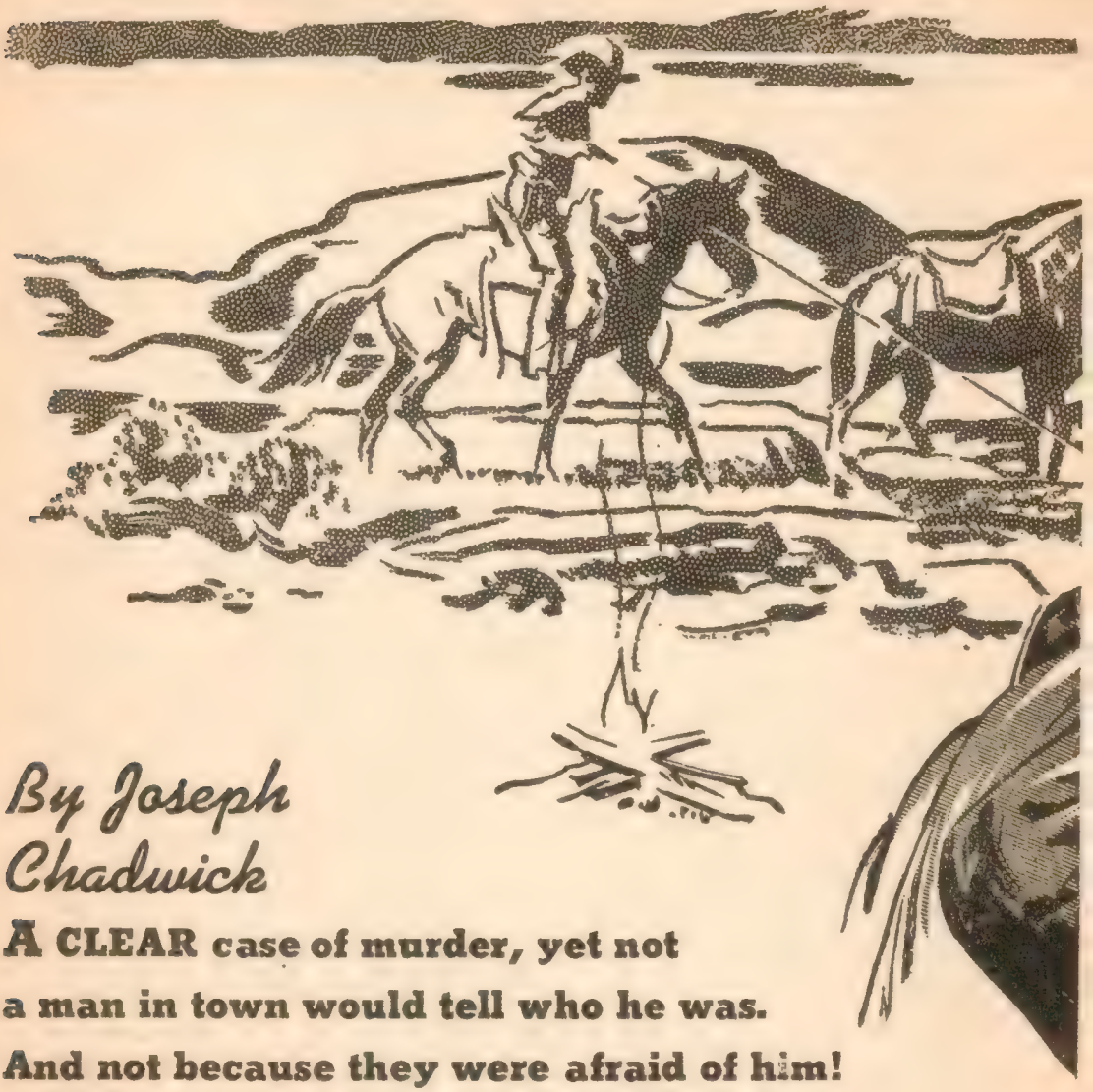
When the group of horsemen arrived at the Fort, he informed Sieber of his plans. Sieber tried to disillusion him; he grimly stated that the only things Ed Schieffelin would find in the hills would be death and a tombstone. Heedless of warnings, Ed mounted his mule and rode alone into the desert.

It was not hard for him to find the spot where he had picked up the stone. The real difficulty lay in tracing it to its source. Knowing the task would involve time and patience, he set up his headquarters in a little valley close to the San Pedro River. One August afternoon he was following what seemed to be the dried-up path of an ancient stream when he discovered the parched skeletons of two men, bleached by the suns and rains of unnumbered years. Between them lay a low pile of silver ore. Bones and ore told of a rich find somewhere in the nearby mountains by two prospectors, and their murder by Apaches as they slept.

Further examination of the ore found there and in the hillside several yards beyond convinced Schieffelin that his quest had ended. With a bag full of rock specimens, Schieffelin set out for Tucson to record his claim. As he galloped along he thought back to what Sieber had said, and he hit upon a name for that desolate spot. It became Tombstone, Arizona.

Other men flocked there as soon as the miner's success became known. Anxious to share in Scheiffelin's good luck, claims were staked throughout that area. Fortunes were taken from the soil, and fortunes were thrown away at the gambling halls of Tombstone. The town grew by leaps and bounds. —*Carter T. Wainwright.*

THE TOWN THAT



By Joseph Chadwick

A CLEAR case of murder, yet not a man in town would tell who he was. And not because they were afraid of him!

LANASSA'S main street—a crooked thoroughfare lined with ugly false-fronts and squat adobe houses—lay mostly deserted in the scorching sun of mid-afternoon. Riding in at a slow walk, Jim Bannister saw only a storekeeper in a doorway, a woman sweeping her stoop, and a cowpoke, asleep hunkered down Indian fashion, on the awninged porch of the Paradise Saloon.

Bannister rode past the saloon, and the cowpoke did not look up. Bannister found it hard to believe that a man could die a violent death in such a sleepily peaceful place. He swung around the side of the Paradise's frame building, dismounted and left his sorrel horse there in the north-side shade. He returned to the front of the saloon and

WOULDN'T SQUEAL

Hot lead seared into Bannister's thigh, and he went down

stepped up onto the long porch. His spurs jingled and his boot heels lifted sharp sound from the bare boards, and the cowpoke, still not looking up, said, "Howdy, stranger. Soldier, ain't you?"

Bannister had his hands raised to the swing doors. He paused and looked at the man, a youngish figure in worn levis, faded shirt and run-down boots. His head was bent, so that his chin rested on his chest, and his flabby sombrero was pulled down over his eyes.

"What makes you think that, friend?" Bannister asked. "You didn't look at me."

"Don't need to see you," the cowpoke said, still unmoving. "A soldier walks different from other hombres—sort of marches. Besides, only a cavalryman would think to take such good care of horseflesh as to stand his mount in the shade. Am I right, friend?"

"Partly right," Bannister said. He was still wearing his uniform breeches, with the cavalry's yellow stripe running its length from boot top to belt, and he wondered if the cowpoke hadn't looked at him after all. "I was a cavalryman until a month ago."

The cowpoke roused lazily, shoved back his sombrero, and his eyes were blue in a boyish face. A battered guitar leaned against the wall, just within reach of his hand, and he reached for it now. He thumbed out a chord, then said, "Officer, weren't you?"

"Captain," Bannister said.

"Name of Bannister?"

Jim Bannister felt his nerves jump. He had never before been to Lanassa, so he could not be known here. He had stopped over at Fort Winfield, six miles away, to learn the details of his brother's death, but no one at the Army post would have rushed the news of his arrival to town. He frowned down at the cowpoke.

"Name of Bannister," he said. "Jim Bannister. How did you know?"

"Knew Dick Bannister. He talked about you. Figured if you were like he said, you'd come." The cowpoke picked a few notes on the guitar. "Look, Captain; my name's Pete Laredo. How'd you like to buy me a drink in fair trade for a song?"

"It's a deal," Bannister said, and passed through the swing doors into the cooler gloom and stale smells of the barroom.

THE PARADISE was big but mostly empty at this time of day, when the soldiers at Winfield were on detail, the cowhands were riding herd, and miners were at their rock-hill diggings. Three hard-looking cases sat at a table over a bottle, a dudish man—evidently the house faro dealer—sat at another playing solitaire, and a drowsy bartender was at the long bar. Bannister called to the bartender to bring a bottle, then took a chair by the wall.

The cowpoke, Pete Laredo, came in walking unsteadily and awkwardly took the other chair. He already looked a little drunk, and he downed in a hurry the drink Bannister poured. Then, with a grin, he said, "What'll you have, Captain?"

"Suit yourself, friend."

"Sure thing."

The cowpoke picked out a chord, then began to sing in a voice that was low but surprisingly good. But it was the words of the song rather than the tune that caught Bannister's ear. The song went:

"So I rode a hundred miles
Just for one of Laurie's smiles.
Quite a chore for you know who—
This tenderhearted buckeroo. . . ."

There were more verses to Pete Laredo's song, and each was about the girl

named *Laurie*. It was that name that made Jim Bannister stare at the young cowpoke; it was the same name the commanding officer at Fort Winfield had mentioned. The name of the girl over whom young Lieutenant Richard Bannister had lost his head, and perhaps his life. Pete Laredo was unaware of Bannister's stare; he sang with a far-away look in his china-blue eyes. The cowboy's mind was befogged with dreams as well as with whiskey.

Across the room, the three hard-looking men had stopped their low-voiced, furtive talk to listen. The gambler—Len Baron, Bannister knew from the information he had gathered at the Army post—was now leaning back in his chair, his cards and his cheroot forgotten. The red-faced and slick-haired bartender, O'Hare, was also listening attentively. And now, coming from one of the upstairs rooms, a girl descended the stairway at the opposite end of the room.

Bannister forgot the others at sight of the girl. Laurie? He felt a vast excitement. She was only a saloon percentage girl, a girl of painted cheeks and spangled dress, yet she was a picture of beauty. She was tall and stately. Her hair was golden, perhaps a real golden and perhaps not. She came forward smiling; she was young, but her eyes were full of an age-old wisdom and did not smile at all. She came to Pete Laredo, and put her arm about his shoulders.

"Still singing about me, Pete?"

The cowpoke's guitar fell silent, and his song trailed away. He grinned up at the girl. "I'll always sing about you, Laurie," he said.

Then it was as though a spell had been broken. The hardcased trio turned back to their drink and their muttered talk. Len Baron, the gambler, puffed at his cheroot and began shuffling his cards. O'Hare started polishing his bar. The girl looked at Jim Bannister, smiled and said, "Hello! You're a stranger here, aren't you?"

Pete Laredo said, "Laurie, this is Captain Bannister."

Jim Bannister stood up. He saw the shocked look in the girl's eyes, heard her breathe, "Bannister. . . . *Bannister?*"

"Dick's brother, Laurie," said Pete Laredo.

"Dick's brother? Oh, yes. . . ." Her voice was shallow, and her face, not smiling now, looked almost haggard. "We knew Dick well, Captain. He was —well, he was here often."

"Too often, I hear," Jim Bannister said, his voice turned rough. "He was here every night he was not on detail, and he paid for his pleasure with his life. You were his friend, Laurie?"

"Yes, I was his friend. We all were his friends."

"And some one of you killed him."

The girl cried out, "Oh, no!" And Pete Laredo said, "Easy, Laurie." At the bar, O'Hare had stopped his polishing to listen. Len Baron too was attentive. Only the three hardcases were unconcerned; they were deep in the discussion of some furtive scheme. Laurie said, through quivering lips, "You are wrong, Captain. It was not one of us, believe me."

Bannister said, "I mean to find the man who killed my brother. I think you people here at the Paradise can help me. May I talk with you alone?" He was asking the girl.

She seemed to shrink from him. But she nodded and said, "Yes, of course. I live in the last adobe house at the east end of Main Street. I will be there from now until dark, then I will be here—working."

"I will call at your house," Bannister said.

SHE went away then, seeming almost to flee. She hurried to an upstairs room, then came down again in a very few minutes with her face washed clear of paint and her spangled red dress changed for a more respectable blue gingham. She left the Paradise by a side door.

Pete Laredo said, "How about another drink, Captain?"

"Help yourself."

The cowboy said, "Thanks, amigo," and almost upset the bottle as he reached out a shaking hand. Jim Bannister saw Len Baron rise and come forward. The gambler's face was swarthy and expressionless.

"Don't use a whip on Laurie, Bannister," he said. "She cared a lot for your brother, and you're coming has made her grieve again. She can tell you nothing. Why not let her be? The officers from the Fort investigated Dick Bannister's killing. They learned nothing. You'll learn nothing. Like you said, he paid for his pleasure."

"With his life," Bannister said. "It was too high a price."

A dull rage was building up in him. He was remembering Dick; remembering him as he had been a year ago, when he graduated from West Point. Dick had been so very young, so full of life and laughs—full of eagerness to get to soldiering. He had been sent West, here to Apache country, and Jim Bannister had not seen him again. Something had happened to the youngster, out here in the Territory. He had endangered his career through drink and gambling—and the girl Laurie. And because of drink, or cards, or the girl, he had died—shot down when he was not armed. He had died here in this town, after a night of carousing.

"If only he had died like a soldier," Jim Bannister flatly said. "Facing the enemy—"

Len Baron dropped his cheroot, ground it under a boot heel. He said, "Bannister, I liked Dick. Believe that." He shook his head almost sadly. "But he was not like you think. I am telling you this, so that you give up this idea of hunting his killer."

The gambler took out his wallet, removed from it some papers. "These are IOU's, signed by Dick Bannister. They run into two thousand dollars." He turned and looked at the bartender. "How much did Dick owe across the bar, O'Hare?"

"Something over a hundred, Len."

Jim Bannister said savagely, "I'll take care of his debts—now!"

Again the gambler shook his head. "He left no debts here," he said, and he tore up the IOU's. "We liked Dick Bannister; he was our friend. But you will never find out who killed him."

The rage in Jim Bannister hardened his face. "There's always a way to make men talk," he said. "Money will buy words as well as silence. I'll pay a thousand dollars to the man—or to the woman—who names my brother's murderer."

Len Baron murmured, "That's no good." O'Hare showed a blank face. The three hardcases at the table showed a bewildered interest. Pete Laredo was drinking straight from the bottle now. Bannister looked down at the cowpoke.

"You hear, Pete—a thousand dollars, gold?"

Pete Laredo shook his head. "I'm plumb hard of hearing, Captain," he said.

Jim Bannister, no longer master of his rage, turned and strode out of the saloon.

ONE side of Lanassa's main street was shaded now, as the sun began to drop in the brassy sky. Bannister led his horse to the livery stable down

the street, then, having turned the animal over to the liveryman, he took his warbag and walked to the Trail Hotel.

He signed the register, then, up in his room, he washed up and stretched out on the bed. He stared unseeingly at the unplastered ceiling, his thoughts churning in an emptiness. He was up against a rock-wall of silence. The commanding officer at Fort Winfield had warned him that it would be so. Officers from the Fort had investigated immediately after Dick's body had been found. They had learned nothing. The townspeople were honest in their ignorance of the murder, and the people of the Paradise, who certainly knew, would not talk. It was like following an Apache trail. The trail was clear enough, at first. But in the end, it vanished into the vastness of the desert or into the jumbled wildness of the mountains.

At sundown, Bannister ate an evening meal in the hotel's dining-room. Afterward, he rolled and lighted a smoke and stepped out onto the hotel porch. With dusk, the town was coming alive. Townspeople stirred. Miners came in from their diggings, and cowboys rode in from close-by ranches. A dozen or so blue-clad troopers arrived from Fort Winfield. The doors of the Paradise Saloon swung busily.

His smoke finished, Bannister left the hotel porch and walked east along the street. He saw Pete Laredo, his battered guitar hanging from his shoulder by a cord, lounging against a post of the saloon's wooden awning. The three hardcased men were seated in a row at the far end of the porch. The trio watched Bannister. Pete Laredo did not. The cowpoke was staring dully at the dust of the street.

THE girl's house was a square, flat-roofed adobe. She opened the door the moment Bannister knocked. She was pale and she seemed breathless as she invited him in. Bannister removed his sombrero and found himself in a pleasant parlor. The windows were curtained, and there were pictures on the walls. It was a room tidy and clean, and it reflected a girl who had not always earned her livelihood smiling at men in a saloon.

Bannister looked at the girl, and said, "You liked Dick, Laurie. He was close to you. He was my brother, and I tried to make him into a man—into an officer and a gentleman. Somehow I failed, and now he is dead. I shall know no peace of mind until I have found the man who killed him."

"And if you find that man?" Laurie asked, in a flat whisper.

"I shall turn him over to the Law," Bannister said. "Or he will kill me when I try it." He saw the girl shudder. "You will talk, Laurie—for Dick's sake?"

She stood there rigidly, her hands gripping the back of a chair. She shook her head. "No, I will never talk."

Bannister took a step nearer her. "He's was so very young, Laurie. His career, his whole life, was ahead of him like a wonderful thing. He would not have told you, but he was about to make a trip East—to marry a fine girl. They became engaged while he was at West Point—"

He saw the girl sway, and her face was so pale it frightened him. She sobbed, then cried out, "I will never talk!" She stared at him, almost wildly. "Maybe it was I who killed him! Maybe I did know about that girl back East, and I was jealous. Maybe I shot him!"

Bannister shook his head. "You can't shield the man who did it," he said. And then he saw that Laurie was not listening to his words.

She had heard another voice. It rang out low but very clear, and infinitely sad, through the gathering darkness. It was Pete Laredo's voice, and he was outside the little adobe house singing. Singing:

"Lonesome is the owlhoot, Laurie,
And life's mighty glum without you.
Now won't you ever cry,
Or miss me with a sigh
. . . . Laurie?"

The girl looked stricken. Jim Bannister felt stunned. The words of Pete Laredo's song had meaning. It held a message for the girl. Pete Laredo was singing of the owlhoot. . . . Bannister muttered something in his throat—what he did not know. He swung toward the door, but Laurie caught hold of his arm. She was strong, desperate, and for a moment she held him. "No," she cried. "No, it was not Pete!"

Bannister broke free of her grasp. He plunged through the doorway into the thickening dark. Laurie's house stood at the end of town, and now Pete Laredo was riding away—away from Lanassa, out into the flat-lands. There was no haste in him; he held his paint horse to a walk, but as Jim Bannister stared after him he was soon lost to sight.

Pete Laredo!

Pete Laredo, with his faraway look and his drunken movements and the sad song in his heart. *"Pete Laredo!"* Bannister muttered.

He turned and strode back toward the center of town, for his horse. He had a glimpse of Laurie in her doorway, her clenched hand pressed hard against her mouth. . . .

BANNISTER picked up his warbag at the hotel, then went to the livery stable for his horse. He paid the liveryman, saddled up, mounted and rode from the stable. Outside, standing in the glow of a lantern that hung over the doorway, was one of the hard-looking trio who had been at the Paradise that afternoon.

"A minute, Captain," the man said. His eyes were bold, steadier than the eyes of an honest man. A scar was livid across his left cheek. "My name's Frisco, Captain," he went on, as Bannister reined in. "I heard you make that offer in the saloon today. I'd like to collect that thousand dollars, gold."

Bannister stared silently back at the bold eyes.

Frisco shifted his feet, suddenly uneasy. "I mean, Captain, I can tell you who killed your brother."

"Friend, you're too late," Bannister said, and swung away.

THERE was an early moon, a three-quarters moon crystal bright, and Pete Laredo's trail across the flatlands was easy to follow. But then, along by midnight, the moon was gone and Bannister lost the trail. But Pete Laredo had headed straight East across the desert, and Bannister continued in that direction, not hurrying.

The pink-gray dawn brought him to a Mexican hovel by a waterhole. Bannister drank, filled his canteen, watered his horse. The Mexican sold him a morning meal and some grub for his saddle bag, and, for a ten-dollar gold piece, said, *"Si, Senor.* You are right. A rider passed by here an hour ago." He pointed toward the obscure distance. "He headed for the *mal pais.*"

Bannister gave his horse an hour's rest, then he mounted and pushed on. It was easier now; with daylight, Pete Laredo's trail was clear-cut. The cowpoke was not hurrying, but neither was he tarrying on the way. His trail was as straight, Jim Bannister thought, as a surveyor's line. Bannister took out his sixgun, a big Navy Colt, and

checked its loads. He meant to overtake Pete Laredo before the day was done.

The sun rose and blazed in a pale sky, and a heat haze shimmered on every distant ridge. The trail grew torturous, sharp and ragged over ancient lava beds, and the whole wasteland was bleak and brownish-yellow except for here and there a bit of color in the star blossoming of stalky mescal. Rocks cropped out, some boulders and others cathedral spires. Once Bannister saw a heap of bleached bones. The sun beat fiercely down, and the heat slowed Bannister's mount to an ungainly pace.

Then, at long last, the sun was a red ball near the desert's western rim, and Bannister's aching eyes saw a wispy column of smoke ahead. The terrain sloped away and now there was a bit of sage and scrub mesquite, and Bannister's sorrel perked up over the nearness of water. The sun was down, and a purplish haze was stealing over the wasteland, as Bannister sighted Pete Laredo camped by water.

The waterhole was big. Pete Laredo had built a fire of dry mesquite sticks, and he was cooking coffee in a tin can. His paint horse, sweated and dust-begrimed, stood drooping as it munched the scant forage. The cowpoke's guitar lay against his saddle on the ground. Pete Laredo smoked a quirly and did not look up.

Bannister reined in, and said, "Pete, you leave a broad trail."

"I knew I couldn't get away from you, Captain," Pete said. "Step down. I have coffee and some rock-hard sourdough biscuits."

Bannister dismounted, his every movement wary. He stood beyond the crackling fire, suddenly uncertain. He said, "You gave yourself away, Pete." He shook his head. "Somehow, I wish you weren't the man."

"What do you figure on doing, Captain?"

"I'm taking you in to the Law, Pete."

PETE LAREDO lifted his lean face. His eyes were dull, but it seemed to Jim Bannister that they looked through and beyond him. "How?" said the cowpoke.

"You've got a gun," Bannister said. "I'll give you a chance to draw."

Pete shook his head. "No, Captain. I don't want to die out here."

"Then you're going back?"

"Now that's funny, Captain . . . for I don't know." A slow smile curled the cowboy's lips. "Maybe though, you'll gunwhip me. Maybe you'll beat me down, and take me back. You want to see me hang, Captain?" Again he shook his head. "I wouldn't draw on you, friend, even though I thought I could kill you."

Jim Bannister stared, vastly bewildered. He had expected Pete Laredo to fight like a cougar when cornered. Now, as he stood there uncertainly, Pete flung away his quirly and reached for the can of steaming coffee. He held the can out toward Bannister.

"Drink up, Captain."

Bannister said, "No, thanks," afraid that if he took that can in his hand Pete would go for his gun. He saw the cowpoke shrug, then lift the coffee to his lips. Bannister hunkered down and rolled a smoke, careful not to take his gaze off Pete Laredo. He permitted the cowpoke to finish his meal of coffee and biscuits, then he said, "Why did you kill Dick Bannister, Pete?"

"Did I say I killed him, Captain?"

"No; but you did kill him. Why?"

"Maybe he got in my way."

"He came between you and the girl Laurie?"

Mention of that name brought a

bleakness to the cowpoke's lean face. He said flatly, "Maybe. Maybe that was it. He came along in his uniform and with his fine manners, and then Laurie forgot that there were other men in this world. Maybe I killed him for that."

Jim Bannister nodded, seeing that it must have been like that. He had heard Pete Laredo sing of Laurie, and he had seen him and the girl together there in the Paradise. Bannister remembered how he had stood by Dick's grave, there in the cemetery at Fort Winfield; he had sworn to avenge the boy's murder, and he had been full of hatred for the man who had committed that murder. Yet now, facing Pete Laredo over the brush fire, he could not hate him. It was odd, but he could not hate Pete Laredo.

Darkness was closing down, and Pete now rose and went for his guitar. He moved awkwardly, as he had in the Paradise, still seeming half drunk, and Bannister wondered if he did not have a bottle hidden in his saddle bag. Pete lay down with his head on his saddle and began strumming the guitar. Bannister rose and gathered more brush for the fire, wanting light enough so that he could watch each of the cowboy's movements.

Not singing this night, Pete played softly for a little while. Then he fell silent and lay staring at the night sky. Suddenly he said, "Captain, riders are coming."

Bannister listened, but it was several minutes before he too heard the distant clatter of hoofs. Then he said, "A trap, Pete?" But Pete Laredo said, "No, Captain. I know nothing of this."

THE riders came nearer, heading directly for the glow of the fire. Bannister drew his gun and held it in his hand. A voice called out, "Hello, camp!" Then three men rode fully into the fire's flickering glow. They were the hardcased men who had been at the Paradise Saloon—one of them the man Frisco, who had offered to tell Jim Bannister who had murdered Dick. They reined in with guns in their hands.

Frisco grinned, and his scar was an ugly mark across his left cheek. He said, "Pete, saddle up and ride out."

The cowboy rose to obey, saying nothing. Bannister, keeping his gaze on the three hardcases, heard Pete finally mount and ride off into the darkness. Bannister felt a clammy sweat break out on his body. The sounds of Pete's paint horse drew off into the dark stillness, finally were lost. The man Frisco dismounted, stepped forward to face Jim Bannister over a space of a dozen feet.

"We don't aim to harm you, Bannister," Frisco said. "But there are three of us to one of you—three guns against your one. All we want is for you to be sensible, and hand over that money you talked about in Lanassa. Where do you have it, friend—in a money belt?"

Bannister gauged his chances. If he could shoot down Frisco, he might have a chance. He said, "Yes, in my money belt." He lifted his left hand as though to unbutton his shirt. Then he swung his gun up.

A gun blasted, but it was neither Bannister's or Frisco's. One of the other hardcases had fired from the saddle. Bannister felt his left leg knocked from under him. He fell sprawling onto his face. Frisco jumped toward him and kicked the gun from his hand. Frisco rolled him over, ripped open his shirt, jerked loose his money belt.

Frisco said, "That was a plumb foolish thing to do, Bannister."

He turned away, mounted his horse.

He said, "Let's go, boys," and the three of them swung about. Frisco rode at Bannister's sorrel and, yelling wildly, slapped it over the rump with a quirt. The sorrel ran off into the darkness ahead of the trio.

BANNISTER lay for a time, waiting for the shock of the wound to work itself out of his system. When his mind cleared, he realized that there was no great pain. That would come later—when the untreated wound festered and sent its poison through his veins.

He dragged himself close to the dying fire. He took out a clasp knife and slit the leg of his breeches. The wound was bleeding, but not profusely. The bullet had entered the fore part of the lower thigh, passed out close to the back of the knee. Bannister took his neck scarf and wrapped it tightly about the wound. He tried not to look into the immediate future. There was no good in dwelling upon his danger. He was unable to walk, his horse was gone, and he was in the middle of nowhere. No hope of any rider chancing upon in time. . . . He crawled to the water and drank deeply. The fire died to embers. Bannister stretched out on his back. Soon, there was a heavy throbbing in his leg.

He did not sleep, but his mind was dull and unthinking—like a drugged mind. And then, after hours of blankness, he was not sure he heard rightly when a voice called out, "Captain, you hurt bad?"

Bannister called out, "Pete, you there?" His mind cleared, and filled with alarm. His gun was lost in the darkness; he was at the mercy of this strange natured cowboy, who now loomed darkly on his paint horse. Pete Laredo said, "I rode off a piece, then came back when those hardcases rode off. I heard a shot, and I figured they maybe killed you. What did they want, Captain?"

"They were after my money. They shot me in the leg, and they drove off my horse." Bannister's eyes searched the ground for his gun; he could not see it. "You're top-dog now, Pete. What do you aim to do?"

"Reckon I'll have to get you back to Lanassa and to a medico."

"Pete, you mean that?"

"Sure, Captain. If I don't, who will? You'll die out here if I ride out on you." Pete laughed softly. "Shucks, I ain't holding no grudge. We'll wait until morning. I figure those hombres didn't chase your horse far. We'll round it up, come daylight, then hit the trail back."

DESPITE his throbbing leg, Jim Bannister slept. When he awoke, dawn was breaking and Pete had the fire going again. Bannister lifted himself up on his elbows and looked about. His sorrel had come back, drawn by water and the scant forage about the hole. Pete Laredo had coffee cooking, and Bannister felt a sudden hunger. He dragged himself close to the fire, and Pete said, "We'll eat, then hit the saddle, Captain." He handed Bannister the tin can of steaming coffee.

After coffee and stale biscuits, Bannister whistled for the sorrel. The animal came obediently to him, and he caught hold of the stirrup and lifted himself up onto his good leg. Pete came and helped him mount. The cowboy then saddled his paint horse, moving as always like a man half drunk. Bannister wondered about that; he had smelled no liquor on Pete's breath. Slinging his guitar from his shoulder, Pete was about to mount when Bannister saw his six-gun on the ground

and said, "Pete, pick up my gun."

Pete hesitated, saying, "Where is it, Captain?"

"Over to your left, about ten feet from the fire."

The cowboy left his horse, walked close to where the gun lay. He stooped and felt around on the ground with his hand—and suddenly Jim Bannister knew. He knew why Pete Laredo moved awkwarly like a drunken man. He knew too why Pete had not lost him in this wasteland, and why, when they met, he had not drawn his gun. And Bannister suspected a lot more. Pete Laredo was blind!

Shaken to the core, Bannister said, "The gun is a foot beyond your hand." Pete found it then. Returning to his horse, he held the sixgun out to Bannister. He concealed his disability well, so well that for a moment Bannister thought he might be mistaken.

"Pete, you're blind!"

"That I am, Captain. Didn't you know?"

Bannister felt choked up. He said unsteadily, "Pete, you didn't kill my brother. You led me away from town—to shield someone. And that someone was Laurie. She told me the truth, back in her house. She killed Dick Bannister!"

Pete Laredo said, "Dick told her he was through with her, that he was making a trip East to marry another girl. Laurie got hysterical, like some women do, and she threatened to kill herself. She didn't mean it. She was just trying to hold Dick. She had a gun in her house, and she got it out. Dick grabbed her, and they struggled. The gun went off. . . . The cowpoke sighed. "Laurie told Len Baron and O'Hare at the Paradise, and they told me. We carried Dick's body out of her house. We swore each other—and Laurie—to silence, because we knew that a girl who worked in a saloon wouldn't have much chance of being believed by the Law."

Bannister's thoughts ran rampant. Laurie . . . Pretty Laurie, whose eyes were so full of the wrong sort of wisdom. Pete Laredo, whose eyes saw nothing—and everything. Len Baron, the gambler, and O'Hare, the bartender . . . Jim Bannister shook his head at the strangeness of it all.

"Pete," he said kindly, "you must think the world of her."

"She was kind to me," Pete said. "But now she is gone. . . ." He lifted his blind eyes to Jim Bannister. "You'll never find her, Captain. We fixed it. Len Baron and O'Hare sent Laurie away, far away, after I led you away from Lanassa."

He mounted his paint horse, and together they rode out into the barren malpais toward distant Lanassa. Pete no longer had a song on his lips; he was silent with his lonely thoughts. But Jim Bannister was thinking that though he had lost a brother, he had found another—in Pete Laredo. It was a comforting sort of thought.

THE END

HOW CALIFORNIA GOT ITS NAME

IN THE early part of the 16th century, Hernando Cortez, the renown Spanish explorer, after having conquered Mexico sailed northward up the coast of what is now known as the state of California. Cortez and his fellow adventurers were astonished by the difference in climate they experienced: in Mexico the climate was somewhat moist and the heat was not unbearable, whereas along the Californian coast the climate was unexpectedly dry and the heat was quite oppressive. Therefore, Cortez first designated the bay he happened to be in and later the entire territory "tierra california, which comes from the Spanish word, "calida fornax," which signifies fiery furnace or hot as an oven. Thereafter, the early map-makers and geographers used this word but with a few slight accidental variations. However, in the end, the single word, California, arose and remained as the name by which we designate one of our greatest and grandest states. —*T. Borr.*

STRANGE FACTS ABOUT the West

By A. MORRIS

IN THE Chase National Bank in New York is a famous exhibit, "Collection of Moneys of the World." There, people often stop before the display of American Indian paper money.

Paper money issued by the American Indians is believed to have been issued about 1840 or 1850 by the Arapahoes in Oregon. Their only known specimen bears the following inscription: "Office of Discount at Arapahoes way in the Far West. The President and Directors of the Oregon State Bank promise to pay five dollars on demand."

The only known specimen of the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma is a one-dollar note, on which is inscribed in ink, June 18, 1862, and No. 592. It reads: "Lewis Ross-Cherokee Nation" and is payable "in notes of the Confederate States at Tahlequah." Numerous Cherokee symbols are also inscribed on this note.

WHAT would you do if you saw the wealthiest man in America distribute his millions to all passers-by on your home-town's busiest corner? "What a question! What would anybody do, stupid?" You may laugh, but strangely enough, just such a thing *is* happening in America—now!

The American Indians of the Northwest Coast approach the idea of competition in a different way than we do. The wealthiest man is the one who worked the hardest during the year and whose riches are to be used to acquire a more highly prized asset—reputation. The whole pattern of this society, as a result, is based upon the drive for reputation and honor.

This is how it works:

The Indians meet in a great celebration and certain goods are distributed by the wealthy. These are usually blankets, which are highly prized. The person who accepts them is required to return them with interest (more blankets). *The individual who returns the blankets with the most additional blankets receives the greatest honor.* Instead of borrowing at the lowest rate of interest as in our culture, these Indians borrow at the highest rate of interest possible. Glory and the payment of high interest go hand in hand.

Thus, virtue rests in publicly disposing of wealth, not merely acquiring and accumulating it. Any other objective than immediate redistribution is, in fact, unthinkable. There are never any hoarders, any millionaires, nor any armored cars. This society, it can be seen, has its own peculiar conception of competition.

In other parts of world, numerous incidents have shown that foreign peoples have, from our point of view, curious motives underlying their economic activity. One traveler bargained with a native merchant in Madagascar for a piece of raffia cloth, finally securing it at a price much greater than any native would have paid. The traveler then offered to buy the native's entire stock at the same price, but the offer was flatly refused! If he sold out, the merchant explained, he would have nothing to do for the rest of the day.

Another traveler witnessed as peculiar a situation in a Mexican market. He purchased for two dollars a handmade chair from a Mexican peon. He then asked how much the Indian would charge for ten such chairs, and was told 25 dollars. When the traveler expressed surprise at this increase in "wholesale" rates, the merchant explained that he would find making nine more chairs exactly alike too precise and annoyingly monotonous.

THE Cree are a particularly gentle and peaceful people. They severely frown upon all bloodshed, and murder is entirely unknown. But one factor complicates the realization of these standards: the low development of their society makes their bread-winning extremely difficult. Famines strike them often, and their peaceful pursuits are violently disrupted by a craving for human flesh!

Because of the strong taboos on human flesh in their society and because of their essential peaceful and gentle nature, it is not surprising that these Indians soon lose their minds! The severe mental conflicts set up by extreme hunger, on the one hand, and powerful taboos, on the other, are too much for these simple people. The principal disorder of the Cree is called the "Wihtiko psychosis"—a psychopathic craving for human flesh, accompanied by the delusion that one has been transformed into a Wihtiko, a greatly feared spirit (known in the folklore) who is cannibalistic.

Thus, the Cree cannot reconcile the idea of his simple, peaceful nature with the thought of his new and desperate craving. As a result, he thrusts the blame on the Wihtiko, the only known "person" in the Cree Society who is a cannibal.

HURNEY GOES LAW-ABIDIN'

By Wayne D. Overholser

HURNEY was smart—he never did anything in the open so he'd get caught. But he wasn't the kind of a guy who'd murder . . .

MOST folks in Whiskey Neck and along Banjo Creek, including Sheriff Joe Rockett, were suspicious of old man Hurney from the time he bought the Abel Smith homestead and moved in. Joe wasn't by nature a suspicious man, but it struck him as being queer that anybody would buy the Smith place, especially an old man who lived alone. The best part of the homestead was in the canyon where the sun found the bottom only during the middle of the day, and the nearest ranch was Frank Demaree's D Bar D five miles down the creek.

Joe had been in the south end of the county the day Hurney came in on the stage, but he hadn't been back in town ten minutes until he heard about the old man buying a team and buckboard, loading it with supplies and heading for the Smith homestead with nothing more than a few surly grunts.

"It's a funny thing," the liveryman, Alec Rogers, told Joe that night as they were having a drink in the Special Sa-

Something hit Joe Rockett on the back of the head and he went out like a light

loon. "This Hurney looks like a tomcat with a white beard. He's a little old dried up runt who acted like he'd been drinking sour cream."

"Some tomcat," Joe opined genially. He'd been out to see Nina Demaree, and they'd finally settled on a wedding date.

"You ain't funny," Rogers growled. "The old hound bought that span of bays and a buckboard from me without saying a friendly word. I tell you, Joe, the old coot's up to something."

"Mebbe we're gonna have a crime wave along Banjo Creek," the storekeeper, Len Marks, said.

"Might be he's hiding out," Joe admitted.

"Another funny thing," Marks said, "was that valise he had. The way he carried it, it must have been full of gold."

"That's right," Rogers agreed. "Joe, you'd better ride out there, and arrest that old goat for robbery, murder, and arson."

"I'll go see him tomorrow," Joe promised. "Sort of welcome him into the community."

But it was far from a welcoming reception Joe received when he rode up to Hurney's cabin. The old man was standing in the doorway, a double-barreled shotgun in his hands.

"Howdy," Joe called amiably as he reined up. "What's the scattergun for?"

For a moment the leathery-faced oldster looked Joe over from the crown of his battered Stetson to his boot-encased feet. Young Joe Rockett was a medium-tall man, blue-eyed, and as lean and hard as the barrel of the .45 on his hip. A good lawman, this Joe Rockett, and folks in Sheridan County liked him, partly because he was a good sheriff, but mostly because he liked people, and went out of his way to show it.

"You'll find out," Hurney said finally, his white whiskers wiggling comically as he talked, "if you don't turn around and get to hell out of here."

"Kind of proddy, ain't you?" Joe asked, still trying to be friendly.

"Proddy or not," Hurney snapped. "I didn't come up here for no social palavering. Git."

"Hold on," Joe said, still keeping a tight rein on his temper. "I don't know nothing about you except that you're a stranger. Your closest neighbors are the Demarees living down here on the D Bar D. There's no reason why you should be so danged poisonous. The Demarees will be friendly if you give 'em a chance."

"Mister," Hurney growled, "I'm poison to anybody who comes nosing around here. I'm gonna nail up 'No Trespassing' signs, and by hokey, I'll fill anybody full of buckshot I see on my land."

NEVER before had Joe Rockett, in twenty-four years of living, run into anything like this. He stared down at the old man whose faded gray eyes were filled with more misery than anger. He said slowly, "Hurney, I'm sorry for you. I don't know why you're acting this way, but it ain't natural." Then Joe turned his mount down the creek and rode away.

Either Hurney was hiding from the law, Joe thought, or else he had a valise full of gold as Len Marks had said, and had gone a little crazy fearing that it might be stolen. He told the Demaree family that as he sat at the table with them that noon.

"Anybody'd be loco who'd buy the Smith place," Frank Demaree said.

"Mebbe it's just right for what Hurney wants," Joe said, and laid his gaze on Nina who sat across from him. He could hardly believe yet that this girl

with the copper-colored hair and the warm, full lips had promised to marry him. Now a sharp pang of fear knifed through him when he thought that something might make him lose her.

Nina had been smiling at him. Suddenly the smile faded as she sensed his feelings. "What is it?" the girl asked.

"You're the prettiest girl in Sheridan County," Joe said reverently. "Somehow it don't seem right for you to be marrying a galoot like me."

Frank Demaree grinned at his wife. "Got it bad, ain't he?"

"Just like you had it once," Mrs. Demaree answered.

"What do you mean, once?" Demaree demanded. "Ain't I still got it?"

"Not like you used to have when you talked that way," Mrs. Demaree said.

"When you two get done," Nina broke in, "I'd like to know what Joe's thinking about. He's never talked to me like that before."

"Just a hunch, I guess," Joe said. "It would be like you to go moseying up there to old man Hurney's, and get on the receiving end of a load of buckshot. He looked to me like he was loco enough to do just what he said."

There were dimples in Nina's cheeks when she smiled at him. "It's going to be uncomfortable marrying a man who can read your mind. I was just thinking I'd visit Mr. Hurney right away before he put his signs up."

"If you do I'll turn you across my knee and wallop you right after we're married," Joe threatened.

"If you do I'll put strychnine in your coffee the next morning," Nina said quickly. "And Joe, be sure you take out that insurance. No use wasting the strychnine."

As Joe rode back to town the uneasy feeling was still with him. Nor did it leave in the days that followed. It was the next Saturday that he saw Nina again. She rode into town with her father, and reined up in front of Joe's office, an impish smile on her lips. "I did it," she called, "and I didn't get any buckshot. I'm going over to the store to buy that strychnine now so I'll be sure and have it."

"You're as crazy as old man Hurney," Joe said angrily.

"Oh no, I'm not," Nina said. "He likes me. You'd better be jealous. He invited me back, and I'm going. You know, Joe, he isn't so bad. I think he's lonesome. I took a huckleberry pie with me. I guess that unlocked his heart."

"It should," Joe said, and thought that if anybody along Banjo Creek could soften the old man up, it would be Nina. "Get down off that cayuse. We'll round your dad up, and go over to the hotel for dinner. And Nina, will you please not go up there anymore?"

"No, I won't please," she answered flippantly. "I'm going."

DURING the weeks that followed Joe took several pasears up Banjo Creek, riding over Hurney's place, or looking down at the cabin from the canyon rim. He had no illusions about what would happen if Hurney caught him. The old man would shoot first, and talk afterwards. He had his signs posted, and already Pete Foster from Wagontongue had come into Whiskey Neck to get patched up.

"I didn't believe in signs," Pete said, "but I do now. The old devil let fly without saying a word. If he'd been closer I'd be a dead pigeon. I lit a shuck out of there right away, seeing as he had another barrel."

For more than two months Joe didn't see anything around Hurney's place that looked suspicious. Then one day there were three horses in Hurney's corral. As far as Joe knew the old man

owned only the team of bays he'd bought from Alec Rogers. The third horse was a sorrel.

"There's something mighty funny going on at Hurney's place," Joe told the Demaree family later that week. "I can't ride in there and arrest the old man until I've got something to go on, but I've got a feeling I'd save trouble if I did. Reckon I'll have to keep my eyes peeled, and mebbe I'll find out what the old man's up to."

"Joe," Frank Demaree said, "the other night just about dusk I was up there where the canyon widens out, you know, a mile or so below Hurney's place," he waited until Joe nodded, and went on, "and I met a feller forking a sorrel. He'd just come out of the canyon. Couldn't have come from anywhere but Hurney's cabin."

"What did he look like?" Joe demanded.

"He was the toughest looking hombre I ever met up with," Demaree answered. "The light wasn't good so I didn't see him too well, and mebbe I was a little jumpy, seeing as Hurney is acting the way he is, but he sure wasn't a gent I'd want to meet on a real dark night. He was wearing a black outfit, and he had his Stetson pulled down so I couldn't see much of his face, but I sure saw the guns on his hips. He wasn't carrying them like no amateur."

"Sounds like Black Buck Doney," Joe said thoughtfully. "They think he's come north."

"For a couple of grown men," Nina scoffed, "you two are getting yourselves worked up mighty high over nothing but a daydream."

"Nina," her mother said reprovingly.

"I don't care," Nina cried. "I've been up there a dozen times, and I've never seen any tough-looking men."

"You will if you keep going." Joe took the girl's hand. "Honey, your going up there worries me. It begins to look as if Hurney bought this place and keeps everybody off so it can be a stopping place for owlhooters on their way through the country."

"Then why does he let me come up there?" Nina asked.

"I don't know," Joe admitted, "but he must have some kind of scheme to make use of you, or he wouldn't."

Nina jerked her hand away. "Joe Rockett," she exclaimed, "I'm ashamed of you. Gramp Hurney is just a lonesome old man."

"He wasn't very lonesome when he showed me the front end of his shotgun," Joe said grimly. "Nina, haven't you seen anything suspicious?"

"I did open a box," she admitted. "It's a funny Chinese thing. I'd asked him about it, but he wouldn't let me open it. One day when he wasn't around I took a peek. All it had were some papers and a pair of pearl-handled six-shooters."

"Look, Nina." Joe cupped a hand under her chin, and tilted her face up. "This is an order. Don't go up to old man Hurney's cabin again until I figger out what he's up to."

"The order," Nina breathed, "will not be obeyed. It's time that the man I'm going to marry learns something about the woman he's going to marry. I won't be ordered."

Joe dropped his hand. He said curtly to Frank Demaree, "There's no substitute for a willow switch when they're little," and walked out.

FOR a week Joe rode the upper Banjo country trying to pick up fresh horse tracks. He spent a part of each day hunkered on the rim watching Hurney's cabin. He found no fresh horse tracks, nor did he see any horses in Hurney's corral except the bays and Nina's pinto. There was nothing for Joe to do

when he saw Nina ride up the canyon but to sit on the rim, and curse softly and feelingly.

Then, one morning a week after Joe had walked angrily out of the Demaree house, he saw Hurney drive into town in his buckboard. Joe stood in the doorway of his office watching Hurney load the supplies he'd bought from Len Marks in his buckboard. When the job was done and Hurney had gone into the Special Saloon, Joe crossed the street to the store, and asked Marks, "What did Hurney buy?"

"The usual run of grub," the storekeeper answered, "and some tobacco and ammunition. Mostly .45 shells."

"But he never carries a six-gun," Joe said thoughtfully. He left the store, and waited beside the buckboard until Hurney came out of the saloon. He said, "Hurney, I want to talk to you."

The old man whirled away from the buckboard, white whiskers quivering in a sudden and useless rage. "I ain't talking to nobody," he shrilled. "Leastwise a law dog."

"What's the matter with a law dog?"

"Matter?" Hurney's voice rose until it was almost a scream. "I hate 'em. That's all. I hate 'em."

"Why?" Joe insisted.

"Why? Hell's bells. I got a right to hate 'em, ain't I? They go around shooting people, or throwing 'em into the jug. Trying to keep folks from living like they want to." He stopped, his eyes glittering with savage animosity. "Look at you. You even tried to keep Nina from coming up to see me. She's the . . ."

That was too much. "Look, you whiskered, old goat," Joe grated. "I tried to visit you, and you throwed a shotgun on me. You peppered Pete Foster with a load of Buckshot. You've got 'No Trespassing' signs posted all over your place. I'm telling you, Hurney, if anything happens to Nina when she's up there visiting you, I'll come after you, and I'll slice your heart out."

The savagery went out of the old man then. He lowered his head, and stood for a moment digging a worn boot toe into the dirt of the street. There was a hole in the top of his Stetson through which a lock of white hair poked directly at Joe. When he lifted his head two tears had flowed down his dust-covered face, leaving two little muddy paths through the whiskers.

"You must have some good points," Hurney said huskily, "for a law dog. Nina likes you, so you must have. I don't know much about women, but most of 'em are as ornery as sin. Nina's different. She's the purtiest, sweetest, nicest . . ." He stopped, and dragged a dirty sleeve across his face. Then his old animosity returned. "Damn you, law dog. Dunno why I should be snivelling like a hound pup. Nothing will happen to Nina when she comes to see me. Nothing. You hear me? I'll keep anything from happening to her if it kills me." Then old man Hurney stepped into the buckboard and drove away.

Joe Rockett, standing there in front of the store, watched the rig until it disappeared, and realized he knew no more about what manner of old man Hurney was than he did before. He would have ridden up Banjo Creek that afternoon again if a telegram hadn't come in from the sheriff of Custer County saying that the bank in Roaring Fork had been robbed by Black Buck Doney's gang, and it was thought they were already in the Big Yellows north of Whiskey Neck. There was nothing for Joe to do but gather a posse and head for the Big Yellows.

"Who is this Buck Doney?" Alec Rogers asked as they left town.

"He's new in these parts," Joe answered. "He's operated for years farther east, mostly in Oklahoma. They busted up his gang too, three months ago, but Buck got away. He's one of those braggy jayhoos who always likes to tell folks he was the one who did the job. Always leaves an ace of spades behind him. Reckon that's how the sheriff in Roaring Fork knew it was him."

"Reckon he's picked up another gang?" Rogers asked.

"It looks like it," Joe said. "There was two, mebbe three that got away. It's easy enough to pick up another man or so."

Joe thought about Hurney and his strange actions, about Demaree seeing the man who answered Doney's description leaving Hurney's place. It was possible that Hurney had belonged to Doney's outfit in Oklahoma, and he'd come north to establish a hideout in a new country. Perhaps Doney had checked up on the hideout while he was planning the job east and having a look in Banjo Canyon, and then gave it up. There hadn't been time for Doney to get to Hurney's cabin from Roaring Fork. If that was where he was headed the chances were the posse would pick up his trail in the Yellows.

THAT was Thursday. Late Saturday night the posse was back in Whiskey Neck; tired, dirty, hungry, sleepy, and thoroughly disgusted. Nowhere had they picked up the least clue of Black Buck Doney's whereabouts.

"It don't make sense," Alec Rogers growled as he stood alongside Joe in the Special. "The Yellows ain't a big range, and there's enough ranches scattered along that somebody would have seen them yahoos."

"You'd think so," Joe said sourly, "but I refuse to worry about it tonight. I'm going to bed."

But there was little sleep for Joe Rockett that night. A knocking on his hotel room door brought him up out of a bottomless depth. He rolled over, but still it continued. He threw back the covers, and pulled on his pants. Then sleep dropped entirely away from him when he opened the door. Mrs. Demaree was standing there, and one look at her face told Joe what had happened.

"Nina?" Joe asked, fear driving its knife thrust through him.

Mrs. Demaree nodded. "She went up this morning, and she hasn't come back. Frank rode up this evening to see, and a man at the lower end of the canyon shot him. I guess he thought he killed Frank, but Frank was able to get home. I came in after a doctor for him, and I thought . . ."

When Mrs. Demaree hesitated, Joe nodded. "I'll go right away."

"And Joe, don't be too hard on her. I learned after we were married that a man's judgment is better in some things than a woman's, but Nina hasn't learned that yet. Sometimes it's a hard thing to learn."

A bleak smile touched Joe's lips. "And sometimes a man has to learn how to handle his woman. I hope I've learned that. If they've hurt Nina . . ."

"I know, Joe. Be careful."

Before Joe left town he woke Alec Rogers and told him to get the posse together again. "Don't come busting in," Joe finished, "unless you hear fireworks. No telling what I'll land into, and whatever happens, I don't want Nina hurt."

"But one man . . . " Rogers began.

"One man can do a hell of a lot more than a dozen in a case like this," Joe snapped.

The trail to Banjo Creek Canyon was one Joe had ridden a good many times since Hurney had bought the Abel

Smith place, but he'd never ridden it in as short a time as he did this night. He passed within a mile of the D Bar D ranchhouse, saw the light in the window, and thought of Frank Demaree lying wounded there, and wondered if the doctor had come yet. Four miles more and Joe Rockett reined up. Here, at the entrance to the canyon, he would likely find the guard who had shot Frank Demaree.

Joe left his horse close to the south wall, palmed his gun, and bellied forward. Hurney's cabin was still another mile, a long ways to go on a man's belly or hands and knees, but his one chance of doing this job that faced him was to get there undetected. He must have covered fifty yards, slowly and painfully, and was well into the narrow-walled canyon when he heard a noise. He paused, listening. It sounded like a rock falling from the cliff side above it, or it might have been a rock tossed by the guard ahead to distract his attention.

THERE was absolute blackness here at the bottom of the canyon. Joe got to his feet, turned, and tried to see behind him. There was no sound but his own breathing. Joe was sure there was another man close to him, perhaps within reach. Again the click of rock upon the boulder-strewn canyon floor. It must have been thrown, but from where? The only thing to do was to wait until the other man broke.

He heard the man's steps then. Behind him. Not far away. Still Joe didn't move. If he fired . . . There were steps in front of him. Two of them. This one was close, too. He moved forward fast, and ran into the man headlong. He brought his gun barrel whistling down in a short, savage blow, felt the man fold, and whirled to meet the man behind him. He was too late. Out of the blackness came a blow crashing against his head. He plunged forward into bottomless blackness.

Joe Rockett came to in Hurney's cabin. He knew where he was soon as his head cleared, for there had been little change since Abel Smith had lived in it. He saw other things that snapped him back into grim reality. Nina was standing beside the cook stove, staring at him, fear stamped vividly upon her face. Old man Hurney was standing with his back to the stove, hands folded behind him.

Three men whom Joe had never seen before were at Joe's left. Two of them, a pimply-faced kid about eighteen and a stubby, middle-aged man, were sitting on Hurney's bunk. The third was standing in front of them, one foot on the seat of a rawhide bottom chair, his coal-black eyes fixed on Joe. He had a cigar tucked into one corner of his mouth, his black Stetson pulled low over his forehead. This, Joe guessed, was Black Buck Doney, a thoroughly evil man whose wickedness was a stench in the nostrils of decent men.

"How do you like it, law dog?" Doney asked, an amused grin on his thick lips. "We've got your girl, and we've got you. Looks like it might work out all right."

Joe said nothing. His hands were not tied. Slowly he let his right fall to holster, and touched his gun butt. This wasn't right. They were giving him a chance to draw, and even with the odds three to one, or four counting old man Hurney, it was better than dying where he sat. Then, with his fingers curled around the gun butt, he noted the amused smile on Doney's lips, the grins of anticipation on the faces of the kid and the middle-aged man. Suddenly Hurney burst into a cackle

"Go ahead," Hurney shrilled. "Make your play."

Doney whirled on him. "Shut up, you old fool."

Joe knew, then, that the gun was empty. Perhaps they aimed to kill him if he drew it. Perhaps not, but it was the sort of thing that would amuse Black Buck Doney.

Doney was still glaring at Hurney. "I don't know what in hell has gone wrong with you, Squib. You've done everything wrong on this deal."

Hurney didn't answer He was looking at Joe, and he was scared. Somehow that didn't add up. Old man Hurney should have no reason to be scared of Black Buck Doney if this place had been fixed as a hideout for the outlaw bunch. There was something else in the oldster's eyes. It seemed to Joe that Hurney was trying to tell him something that he didn't want Doney to know. Joe gave a quick look around the room, brought his eyes back to Nina's white, set face, and then to Hurney, but he couldn't catch what was in the old man's head.

Doney had drawn his gun, and was holding it loosely across his knee that was elevated above the chair. "We're in a helluva fix, law dog," Doney said. "Squib says it's purty tough going to try to get out of the canyon above here, and I reckon you'll have a posse riding in from below."

Joe started to tell him that was right, and then held his tongue.

"I guess you had quite a ride through the Yellows," Doney went on. He laughed and the kid on the bunk behind him snickered. "I had a friend send that telegram so we could ride in here without having you around, but this danged girl of yours gummed things up. I reckon that's why you're here. There's nothing that'll make a law dog go as loco as a woman." Doney scratched his black-stubbled chin. "I figgered we'd lay around here till things cooled off. You see, we cleaned the bank in Grandview instead of Roaring Fork."

THAT explained things. Grandview lay south of Whiskey Neck whereas Roaring Fork and the Big Yellows lay north. The scheme had been good enough to take Joe and most of the men of Whiskey Neck into the Big Yellows while Doney and his bunch rode into Banjo Canyon, good enough to have worked if Nina hadn't been caught in Hurney's cabin when Doney showed up.

Doney was still scratching his chin thoughtfully. "Law dog," he said finally, "I reckon we'd better wind this up. Your posse will be showing up purty quick, and you're better off dead than otherwise. We can use the girl to dicker with them."

"Don't plug him for a minute," Hurney said suddenly, and cackled shrilly. "He's made me a lot of trouble since I've been here I've got something I want to show him before he cashes in." He walked over to the corner of the room, and come back holding a box covered with intricate Chinese carvings.

Doney looked at it with sudden interest. "That was Shanghai Brown's wasn't it?" he asked. "I didn't know you got away with that."

Hurney cackled again. "Yep. I always had a liking for this, and when Shanghai didn't come back from that last job, and I heard we had to run, I brought this along." He started to open it, and let the lid drop back. He wiggled a bony finger at Nina. "Come here. I want you to see this, too"

Doney was grinning broadly as if he saw a good trick coming. He said, "Get your fun over with, Squib. We've got to beef this law dog, and move up the canyon. It'll be your job to dicker with the posse."

"We don't know a posse's coming,"

the stubby man on the bunk said. "Buck, looks to me like we'd better saddle up and hit north into the Big Yellows. It oughtta be safe after the posse combed the hills."

Doney whirled on the man. "Stub, I'm giving the orders. You're new in the outfit, and by hell, you'd better . ."

Hurney had thrown the lid of the box back. Now he snatched two pearl-handled six-guns from its depths, and tossed one to Joe. He shifted the gun in his left hand to his right, and at the same time drove his right shoulder into Nina in a jarring blow that knocked her off her feet.

For one short, clock-ticking space of time Black Buck Doney had been caught flat-footed, and in that second Joe's fingers closed over the gun. He pronged back hammer as he wheeled toward the three outlaws. Already the little cabin had exploded into gun-thundering violence. Hurney's gun stabbed its ribbon of flame squarely at Black Buck Doney. The stubby man on the bunk shot Hurney a fractional second later.

Joe's gun roared as old man Hurney spilled forward on the floor, Colt dropping from his fingers. The stubby man had begun his turn toward Joe when the first slug knocked him off his feet. He dropped back across the bunk, squeezed trigger once more with the last shred of life in him murderously bitter, a wild shot that drove a bullet into the cabin wall above Joe's head

The pimply-faced youth had been frozen into immobility by the suddenness of this lead-ripped action, but now he was on his feet, gun spewing lead at Joe, and missing. Joe fired at him once, shattered his right arm, and came across the room at him, slashing him across the head with the barrel before the kid could pick up his .45 with his left hand. He fell forward, face close to the cigar that had dropped from Black Buck Doney's mouth.

Joe carried Doney's and the stubby man's bodies outside, rolled the unconscious youth against the wall, and then came to where Nina was kneeling beside Hurney.

"He isn't dead," Nina whispered, "but he won't last long."

Joe carried Hurney to the bunk, opened his shirt, and looked at the chest wound. He shook his head as he buttoned the shirt. Below toward the canyon mouth he heard a burst of gunfire. That would be the posse. Presently he heard horses, and opened the door

"All right, boys," Joe called, and stepped into the yard. "You get the man they had posted below?"

"Sure did," Alec Rogers said.

"There's a couple of carcasses you can take to town," Joe said, "and a punk kid who thought he liked the owlhoot. Hurney's about to cash in, and I want to stay here in case he comes around."

AFTER the posse had gone the old man did come around. There was a peace on his whiskered face that Joe had never seen before. Hurney reached for Nina's hand. Then he looked at Joe as he said, "I got Buck. I've wanted to get him for years, but it took this girl to give me the guts I've always lacked. I've been with his outfit for a long time, running a ranch to give 'em a hideout when they needed it. He's always been mean Always trying to trick somebody like leaving your gun empty in your holster. He wanted to laugh in your face when you pulled trigger and nothing happened. He figgered I had some kind of a trick when I opened up the box. I did, too, only it was on him."

The old man wanted to laugh, but the

strength was not in him. "Girl, I wrote a will leaving this place to you. It's over there in that box. I thought I was done when I left Oklahoma, but Buck found out where I was. There's a dozen sheriffs on the other side of the Rockies that want me. He was gonna tip some of 'em off if I didn't play along with him"

The old man shut his eyes. For a moment they thought he was gone. Then he said slowly, "I've been hating people most of my life. It don't pay. I kept on hating after I came here. I've been scared of law dogs and coyotes like Buck. Couldn't get out of it and I couldn't go straight." He opened his eyes and had his last look at Nina. "Time to cash in. Only got one thing to be sorry about You won't be where I'm going." A moment later old man Hurney was dead.

It was dawn before Nina Demaree and Joe Rockett stood in the front bedroom of the D Bar D ranchhouse, and told Frank Demaree the story. Joe finished with, "Funny how a man like Hurney could have been so full of cussedness all his life, but when the chips were down he thought enough of Nina to take a slug saving her life. He didn't care anything about saving my hide. He tossed me that iron because he knew he couldn't handle them himself."

"There's one thing," Nina said contritely. "I'll take that licking you promised me now. If I'd had any sense I'd have listened to you. Joe, I've been thinking You had two choices. You could have waited and come with your posse, or you could have risked your life coming like you did. What decided you?"

"If we'd come busting in with a dozen men," Joe answered, "Doney would have used you to dicker with, and your chance of getting out alive would have been mighty slim."

"In other words, Joe," Frank Demaree said, "when it comes to a certain stubborn-headed woman, you're . . ." Then Demaree saw he might as well stop talking, for Nina and Joe were too busy to listen. He winked at his wife. "Ma, they sure do have it bad, don't they?"

THE END

Vignettes OF FAMOUS WESTERNERS

By JANE CONRAD

Pecos Bill

The most famous of all westerners never lived! He was the western rival of the legendary woodsman, Paul Bunyan

THE West has its legendary heroes. They are a curious concoction of fact and fancy and emerge as fantastic tales hinging slightly on the truth. The tale of Pecos Bill is one of these and, as tall tales go, it is a difficult one to beat.

Pecos Bill, according to the legend, was born in Texas in a tiny isolated cabin far from any settlement. The cabin itself held enough people to be classified as a tiny community, for Bill had sixteen brothers and sisters. Among all the children Bill was considered to be a very good child. He disturbed no one, but stayed in the cabin peacefully at play with his father's bowie knife

or a couple of rattlesnakes—his favorite toys. The pet which pleased him the most was a grizzly bear cub. By this we are given to believe that Bill was an unusual infant—and he was!

When the family decided to move farther West an accident occurred which separated Bill from them. It happened just after their covered wagon had forded the muddy yellow waters of the rushing Pecos River. As the horses were pulling hard to get up the farther bank the end of the wagon gave way. The wagon was so full of household goods and children that when all its weight fell back with the upward climb of the horses, the end board creaked and broke loose. The infant Bill rolled out. His absence went unnoticed because, according to the story, his parents had so many children that they stopped to count noses only once in four weeks. They didn't miss Bill until two weeks later when the children were lined up to be counted. By that time they had gone so far that they couldn't turn back again.

Bill was all alone in that wilderness. He crawled about until he began to feel hungry. When he started to cry a mother coyote came out of the brush to comfort him. She took him to the hole in the ground where she sheltered her coyote pups. The rabbit meat he was given satisfied his hunger. Before much time had passed Bill and the coyote pups romped together as if they were brothers and sisters. Bill learned to express himself and be understood in their language, and he lived exactly as they did.

Soon he was running with the pack, hunting deer and jack rabbits and chasing over the plains. At night when the moon was shining, he'd sit by himself on a rock, turn his face up to the moon, and howl in a lonesome fashion. Bill soon forgot his other life and began to think he was a coyote.

When he was ten years old, a cowboy met him, shattered his dreams, and returned him to the world of men. The cowboy put the lad on the front of his saddle and they rode away from Pecos River and the coyotes. He carried Bill to the cow camps of the cattle-raising country. And from that time on people called the boy Pecos Bill.

Living with the cowboys Bill learned their tricks and soon became the most talented rider and roper the men had ever seen. Not the wildest broncho could throw him and his roping was unequalled. Pecos Bill could lasso whole herds at a time! He was still unaware, however, of the mechanical blessings of the civilized world. He demonstrated his first feat as the Superman of the West when he saw a railroad train for the first time.

One day when Pecos Bill was sitting alone on a mountain top, the legend goes, a railroad train rounded a curve below and came into view. Bill, never having seen a train in his life before, thought it was some strange creature! Indeed, in his eyes the blasts of smoke, the roaring noise of the engine, and the clatter of the wheels made it appear as some fierce dragon. He quickly flew into action, slung his rope, and roped it! He dragged it up in the air almost to the top of the mountain. While it was dangling there, a fellow named Alkali Ike came along.

"What do you think you've roped, Bill?" he said, beginning to laugh. "That thing's a house on wheels. It's carrying people inside and you've got 'em all scared to death."

"You don't say!" said Bill in surprise. Then he dropped the train down gently and set it back on its track.

Bill decided to apply his energies on the side of law and order. A fierce gang of cutthroats were bringing terror to the settlers of New Mexico, and Bill set out in that direction to see what he could do. As Bill's horse was galloping through a canyon his horse fell. It was an unfortunate accident for the animal had broken its neck and there was nothing for Bill to do but leave it there and continue on foot. Bill slung his beautiful saddle, which was all ornamented in silver, over his shoulder and walked up the trail. Quick as lightning, something sprang out of the cliff above him, and whizzed through the air. A huge mountain lion pounced on top of Bill. It was as fierce as a dozen wildcats but not too fierce for Bill. Pecos Bill wrestled with the animal until it was as tame as a tabby cat. Then he flung his saddle on the creature. Whooping and yelling like mad, he rode on down the canyon making the big cat leap a hundred feet at a jump.

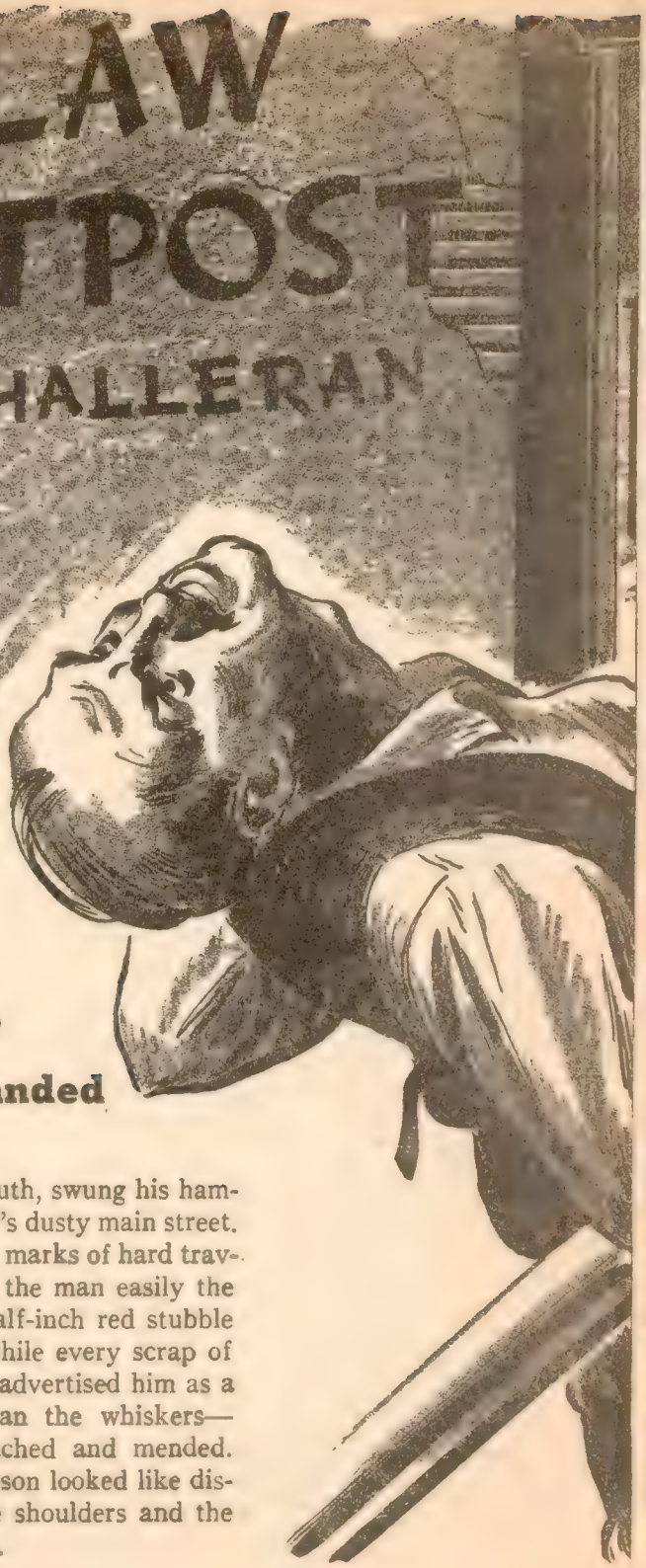
When he came out into the open, the gang of outlaws were there in the clearing ahead. At the time they were eating around their campfire. Splitting the air with his war whoops, his lion screeching and spitting, Bill had the men petrified with fear as he rode up to the fire. Then he seized his lion by the ear and drew him back short on his haunches. He slid from his saddle to the earth and looked around at the outfit.

The outlaws just sat there staring. They were speechless at such a sight. Spying a pot of beans cooking over the fire, Bill reached in his hands, took out two sizzling handfuls and swallowed them down red hot. Then he grabbed up the kettle and drank all the coffee, boiling. After that in his blustering bass voice he demanded to know who was the boss of this group. Without any hesitation the men acknowledged him as their boss and offered to do anything he would ask of them. Triumphantly he led them to the nearest town and handed them over to the sheriff.

These were only a few of the superhuman feats Pecos Bill was capable of performing. He was supposed to be one of the largest human physical specimens that ever lived. Men say that he tamed the hugest pair of horses they had ever seen. In the rocks of New Mexico and Arizona they claim that you can still see in some places the footprints of Bill's big horses. The great white spots on the desert that men call alkali lakes, are really the baking powder left in the mammoth mixing bowls his cooks dug out in the ground when they made baking powder biscuits. All through the West to this day the legend of Pecos Bill is still alive.

OUTLAW OUTPOST

By E.E. HALLERAN



WHEN a man kills himself, he ought to remember he's left-handed

A DUSTY rider, up from the south, swung his hammerhead sorrel into Toro Gap's dusty main street. Both horse and rider bore the marks of hard travel, the sorrel uglier and dustier but the man easily the more disreputable of the two. A half-inch red stubble partly hid the lean cut of his jaw while every scrap of dusty clothing on his angular frame advertised him as a saddle bum. His hair—darker than the whiskers—needed cutting. His gear was patched and mended. His boots and flopping imitation Stetson looked like discards. Only the square set of wide shoulders and the alert gray eyes gave the lie to his act.

. . . crashed the gun barrel down on the guard's head . . .

The eyes narrowed questioningly as he surveyed the silent town. Only the droning flies seemed alive there. No human being was in sight except for a lone rider who sat his horse and held the reins of another in front of the Cattlemen's Bank. The ponies were as motionless as the man. Life seemed to have stopped dead. The newcomer had a queer feeling that this was not a real town at all. He was looking at a dingy photograph, its surface blurred by the shimmering heat waves.

He shook his head a little as the impression struck him Maybe the long ride in the glare had done things to his eyes.

Then his glance caught several odd movements which brought a swift change of thought. A stealthy form had ducked out of sight between two false-fronted buildings. A grim face appeared briefly at a dirty window. A curtain twitched in a house up the street.

That was enough for Ray Nolan. In his business a man didn't wait for folks to write him a letter of explanation: he had to act quickly. He swung the sorrel toward a saloon hitching rail, looped the reins into a hasty knot and broke for the door. The unnatural quiet of the town could mean just one thing with that waiting man and extra horse out there in front of the bank. It was no time to be on the street.

He was reaching for his gun as he slid through the doorway, the gloomy interior leaving him blind after the white glare of mid-day. Abruptly, a voice at his side snapped, "Let that gun alone!"

SOMETHING hard jabbed into his ribs but Nolan twisted impatiently, ignoring the threat "It's a hold-up!" he said sharply. "Out there . . ."

A heavy fist slammed in behind his ear and he went down, dimly conscious that a foot was kicking his gun out of his hand.

His eyes focused even as he struggled to clear his head. Three men were standing over him. A lanky man with gray hair and a sheriff's badge was holding Nolan's gun, motioning with it to the white-aproned bartender. "Get out there and hail Rod Pearce," the sheriff was saying. "We'll see if this jigger was up to dirty work or if he's just crazy with the heat."

The third man, stout, middle-aged and carefully dressed despite the heat, stared frowningly down at the ragged man on the floor. He seemed mildly curious and a trifle puzzled as the sheriff ordered, "Get up—and don't try nothin'! We ain't keen on gunplay in Toro Gap."

Nolan shook his head wonderingly as he climbed to his feet. He had expected trouble but he could never have imagined anything as crazy as this. Maybe the sheriff was right. Maybe it was the heat. It didn't make sense.

He was shoved out into the glare again just as two riders were being flagged down by the bar-tender's apron. One of them was the six-footer he had seen waiting at the bank, a big, blond man who sat his horse with more than a hint of arrogance. It was not the man, however, who took Nolan's eye. It was the girl beside him. Like the man she was blonde and fair-skinned despite her tan—but there the resemblance ceased. She carried herself with an air of dignity that was somehow tempered by a cheerful grin, a dignity which did not seem to suffer because of her costume. Nolan couldn't recall ever having seen so much feminine assurance in a pair of patched levis and a man's shirt. She seemed highly amused at something—and Ray felt certain it wasn't him.

"You know this waddy, Rod?" the sheriff asked the big rider. "Looked like he was fixin' to shoot you from ambush."

Rod Pearce stared down at Nolan, his eyes narrowed with suspicion. Nolan met his gaze, somehow feeling that the man was waiting for a hint as to his reply. No one spoke, however, and Pearce let his face relax into a half smile. "Never saw him before, I reckon. Why?"

Nolan rubbed his jaw hinge ruefully. "My mistake, gents," he said. "When I rode into town I had a feeling that everybody was keepin' outa sight. I saw you holdin' an extra pony in front of the bank and I suspected a hold-up."

The blonde girl laughed merrily. "Stranger, you're almost as bad as these other old grannies. They're so scandalized at me riding around clothespin style that they won't even come out in the open to do their rubber-necking. As if that wasn't bad enough you have to mistake me for a bandit!"

THE men seemed to falter before her amused scorn. Nolan chuckled. "I didn't see you at the time, ma'am, or I'd have known better. Myself, I ain't prejudiced against girls wearin' levis—when they can make such a good job of it." He decided that she was almost beautiful—all but the pert, turned-up nose. He might have mentioned the fact except that already his remark had stirred up trouble. The men behind him were murmuring angrily and Pearce had turned a scowl on the girl as she laughed aloud.

"We better ride," the big man said brusquely. "If you got any notion o' shoppin' in Junction City before train time we'll have to make tracks. Sheriff Tonner don't need us to bandy words with his latest crazy man."

She flashed a smile at Nolan subtly making him a partner in her amusement. Then she moved off in the wake of Pearce.

At his back, Nolan heard the stout man say, "You better lock this man up, Tonner. He's got an idea he's pretty smart and we ain't lookin' for no quick-trigger men in Toro Gap."

There it was again! Nolan knew that Toro Gap had a reputation as an outlaw refuge, a place where a sort of truce was observed between the law and the neighboring outlaw country. Strange things happened here. How did it happen that everybody was now so keen on keeping the peace? And who was this tomboy who laughed at them all yet seemed to command so much respect?

The sheriff nudged him out of his daydream and Nolan decided to make the play he had hoped to avoid. He had not wanted to confide in anyone but he couldn't afford to waste his time in the calaboose.

"Just a minute, Sheriff," he said quietly. "I ain't huntin' trouble. I just made an honest mistake. I got a note for Mr. John Ballard. He's supposed to give me a job."

The stout man asked sharply, "What does John Ballard know about you?"

"Nothin'. I've just got a note from a friend of his. Honest, mister, I'm harmless."

The sheriff chuckled. "I reckon he's just a blunderhead, Dangler. I don't want any customers in the calaboose if I can help it so I reckon I'll go see what Ballard has to say."

JOHN BALLARD was in his private office at the bank when Tonner and Nolan walked in. A bulky man whose bald head oozed great beads of perspiration in the dead heat of the building, he scanned Nolan's note briefly and

nodded to Tonner. "I'll keep an eye on him, Sheriff," he said shortly.

A look of understanding seemed to pass between the two men but as soon as Sheriff Tonner had gone out Ballard closed the door and took a hasty glance out of the window. Then he asked bluntly, "What's it all about? A note from Mike Glenn must mean more than it says."

Nolan pulled a pants pocket inside out and showed a badge. "The note was just in case of emergency. Glenn warned me that I could trust no one in Toro Gap except you. The town has a pretty tough reputation."

He watched closely as Ballard shrugged. The banker's local pride was ruffled at the remark and he hastened to defend the community. "We have to do something to protect ourselves. There isn't much law out here so we have to make a deal with the outlaws. They behave themselves when they come to town and we don't ask questions. We're a sort of neutral zone. How does it happen that your people have suddenly got an interest in us?"

"Couple of slick eastern crooks are reported to have holed up with the local gun-slicks. I'm supposed to get in with the gang."

"Risky business but I guess you can manage it if you hang around town a while. Most of the outlaws come in here sooner or later."

Nolan shook his head. "That won't do. I want to find their outpost. They must have somebody supplying them with food. That's the outfit I want to locate."

Ballard seemed to have lost some of his cordiality. "It could be anybody," he said flatly. "There's at least a dozen ranches near the canyon country."

"I know. We checked them. All but two are small spreads. They couldn't buy extra supplies without us knowing it. Only the Bar-O and the XN are big enough to have their regular purchases cover extras. I know that the Bar-O is part of the Dangler holdings. Harvey Dangler runs the ranch and also a saloon here in town. He also has the controlling interest in a bank and a hotel in Junction City. The gent I'm more interested in is Weaver of the XN. We can't seem to find much on him."

BALLARD regarded him quizzically. "You've been on this trail long enough to know some things, I see. Too bad you don't know your parties better. That was Harvey Dangler out there with the sheriff—the fat gent with the fancy clothes. The girl on the horse was Weaver's daughter."

Nolan chuckled at the memory. "Quite a salty young lady," he observed. "I had her spotted as the sister of that big gent they called Pearce. Who is he?"

"Rod Pearce is foreman of XN. There's some talk that he expects to be Weaver's son-in-law but I guess that will wait. Right now he's taking Joyce over to Junction City. She's headed east for a trip."

"What's your opinion of Weaver?" The question was blunt but the banker answered without hesitation.

"Good man. I like him."

"How come most people pick him for the outlaw agent?"

Ballard frowned again. "Matter of beef, I suppose. One thing which has never been part of the truce is the way the canyon gang picks up beef for their own use. A few of the small ranchers have lost steers that way and Dangler has lost a lot. No big raids, just constant draining off for outlaw use. Weaver never seems to lose any—and he is closer to the badlands than any of the others."

"How is Weaver's bank balance?"

Ballard flushed. For a moment Nolan expected to be thrown out but the stout man controlled himself. "I've got no right to talk about it—but you'll hear gossip so I might as well set you straight. Two years ago I held Weaver's paper for several thousand dollars. He has paid it all off and has a fair balance on hand—in spite of the dent Joyce just made in it. Two thousand dollars in new twenties just went into those disgraceful overalls of hers. Expense money for her trip east."

Nolan grinned. Folks sure had queer ideas in this town. They consorted with outlaws and looked askance at a girl who rode astride and wore men's clothes. He eyed Ballard narrowly. "New twenties?" he repeated. "Sure they were good ones? The jasper I'm after is a little runt named Joe Rubens. He has a nasty habit of imitating signatures and the like. Some of his cutest work has been on twenty-dollar bills."

Ballard reached into a desk drawer and drew out a couple of bills. "Here's the rest of the bundle," he said dryly. "I gave her smaller notes for these. Take a look."

Nolan scanned them with practiced eye. "They're real," he said. As he put them back on the desk he noted the check which Ballard evidently had cashed. The signature of Caleb Weaver was in large, blocky script but the balance of the check was written in a round, feminine hand.

"Looks like the old man spoils the kid," he observed. "He must have given her a blank check to fill out."

"Wrong guess." Ballard chuckled. "She always makes out his legal papers before he signs them. I don't believe he has made a deal since he came out here that he didn't work over with Joyce first. She's the brains of the XN outfit. She makes out the papers and figures out the angles. Caleb just signs."

Nolan had a feeling that Ballard was talking to kill time. He was gossiping readily about the Weavers but he had given no real information that would help establish a relation between XN and the outlaw roost. Nolan decided to press the matter no further. He hadn't wanted to confide in the banker in the first place but his hand had been forced. Better to play a lone hand from here on.

IT WAS nearly noon when Nolan came out of the little restaurant where he had eaten a belated breakfast. Half the day had gone by but the time had not been wasted. Yesterday afternoon he had put on a bit of a splurge in town, using money which folks seemed to assume was Ballard's. A shave and haircut had given him the benefit of the barber shop gossip. Then he had spent most of the night rubbing elbows with outlaws in the Crystal Palace saloon, watching men who drank with a curious air of restraint. Many of them he had spotted as known criminals but there had been no sign of Joe Rubens.

As he stepped out into the morning sunlight he came face to face with Pearce, the XN ramrod. Pearce looked a second time before recognizing him, a quick frown succeeded by an equally quick grin. "Looks like jail did you a heap of good, bud," he remarked affably enough.

"No jail," Nolan replied, trying to make up his mind why Pearce was acting so friendly. "They decided to turn me loose on a man who had a job for me."

Pearce seemed about to ask another question but his eyes narrowed suddenly as he looked beyond Nolan. "Oh-oh!" he muttered. "There's Curly comin' in at a gallop. Must be somethin' amiss at the XN."

There was. Nolan edged into the gathering crowd in time to hear the cowboy's report. Caleb Weaver had hanged himself in the XN ranch house.

"Get me a fresh pony, Krug," Pearce snapped at a man who wore a deputy's badge. "I just rode in from Junction City and my hoss is fagged. I've got to get out to the spread pronto."

"Take it easy," Sheriff Tonner counseled. "You better go along with the rest of us. Doc will have to see him before anything else gets done."

Ten minutes later they were on the trail, Tonner and Coroner Jenks leading the way while Ballard, Pearce, Nolan and Krug strung out behind them. The banker, Ballard, was going along because Curly reported that Weaver had left a suicide note addressed to him. Nolan went because no one seemed inclined to stop him.

Sheriff Tonner bustled around importantly when they reached the scene, volubly reconstructing the affair which all could read as well as he. Weaver's body had been cut down by Curly and another XN rider but the rope end still dangled from a rafter.

"Stood on the chair to tie hisself up," Tonner said. "Then he kicked the chair away."

A LARGE safety pin fastened a folded slip of paper to the dead man's shirt front. Nolan watched silently while the sheriff unfastened the pin and spread the note for all to see. The message was blocked out in the same stubby letters which Nolan recalled seeing in Weaver's check signature.

"To John Ballard: This is good-bye. Settle up for me. There won't be much left after my notes to Harvey Dangler are paid but any balance goes to my daughter Joyce and to Rod Pearce—as partners. Don't be in any hurry to tell Joyce. Let her enjoy her trip first.

Caleb Weaver."

Judging by the swift flurry of comment a large part of this came as a surprise. Nolan recalled how Weaver had paid off his notes to Ballard. Probably he had traded one creditor for another.

Just then his alert gaze caught sight of a little bandy-legged puncher in the doorway. Short, dark, black eyes! If that man was partly bald . . .

Nolan edged toward the door. Maybe he hadn't been wasting his time on the ride after all. Maybe he was going to find Rubens in a hurry. He watched out of the corner of his eye as Tonner fastened the note back on Weaver's righthand pocket. The sheriff was keeping the scene right for the coroner but Nolan was no longer interested. If Rubens was the man in the doorway there would no longer be any reason for Ray Nolan to interfere with a local suicide case.

He plunged suddenly toward the door, upsetting the little man and knocking off the over-size Stetson. "Sorry," he gulped, turning apologetically as he reached the open. "I ain't used to dead men and I was . . . afraid I'd toss my pancakes." He ended the remark with a sickly grin. That part wasn't hard to do when he saw that the little rider had a thick shock of black hair.

He moved away around the corner of the building, swearing at himself beneath his breath. False alarm. Up to now he hadn't done anything right. He had been too free with his confidences and now he had picked the wrong man as Rubens. He was just wasting his time here at XN.

He took his time making a circuit of the house, coming back to the porch in time to hear Ballard ask, "Does any-

body know where Joyce was going? I'm going to wire her right away. She ought to know."

"The note says to wait," Pearce reminded him—"but she bought a ticket to Saint Looey."

Ballard seemed to be figuring something. Suddenly he asked, "Was her train on time?"

Pearce shook his head slowly. "I don't know. I just stayed around 'til she bought her ticket. Then she went shopping and I took care of some business of my own. I didn't notice when the train came through."

"Probably it was late," Ballard said shortly. "It always is. If we can get a man to Junction City in a hurry we might get a wire through to St. Louis in time to catch her before she gets away from the train."

He hailed Nolan sharply. "Get on your horse, son. You wanted a job and here it is. Make it to Junction City just as fast as you can and start burning the wires!"

Nolan was about to refuse, feeling that Ballard was deliberately trying to get rid of him. Then he saw that the others didn't like the move, Pearce voicing a loud protest. That helped him decide. He would at least pretend to go. It might bring action.

Ballard wrote out his orders and handed Nolan some bills. "Ride hard, son," he said in farewell. "That nag of yours isn't very handsome but he looks like he could hold up."

NOLAN left the ranch at a gallop, trying to decide what Ballard's game must be. There was something wrong there that didn't meet the eye. Maybe Ballard was in it. Maybe he just suspected something. Certainly he was no fool: he had seen the worth in a fine horse that looked like a crowbait!

He maintained speed until he was out of sight of the ranch buildings, then he cut the pace and rode easily while he thought matters over. What was Ballard trying to do? What was this partnership between Pearce and Joyce Weaver? Pearce hadn't stayed to see her off on the train. Why had Weaver committed suicide? XN certainly looked prosperous enough to support a fair-sized mortgage.

Twice he halted, half deciding to turn back, but each time he rode on again. His job was to find Joe Rubens but somehow the idea of locating Joyce Weaver kept his mind from his real business. It wasn't until he realized that he was thinking of the girl herself that he turned to retrace his trail. A man had to keep his mind on business and stop this fool thinking about pretty faces!

Then he saw the rider on his back trail, a man who was riding hard. Nolan waited cautiously in a clump of cottonwoods, riding out suddenly as the man came up. It was the deputy, Krug, and Nolan's appearance almost surprised him into going for his gun.

"Looking for me?" Ray asked coolly.

"Sure. I, that is . . . the sheriff sent me after you. He was afraid you didn't know the country and might get lost. Can't afford to lose time."

He didn't make the lie sound at all convincing but Nolan merely nodded. "Glad to have company," he said shortly.

HE SWUNG in beside Krug, eyes sleepy and with the same apologetic grin he had used so effectively on Sheriff Tonner. Krug thought he had something easy, making his play just as Nolan turned his horse. His gun came out suddenly, its blast of flame scorching the front of Nolan's ragged shirt as the younger man twisted

his body backward.

The twist had two purposes. It saved Nolan's life and gave him a chance to draw his own weapon. As Krug cursed and thumbed back his hammer, Nolan's Frontier Model spat a reply to the man's treachery.

Krug was dead before he hit the ground. Nolan caught the deputy's horse and tied it to the sorrel's saddle before he went back to search the fallen killer. The man's pockets produced the usual tobacco and papers, a big knife, a few odd coins—and two crisp, new twenty-dollar bills.

Nolan's eyes widened. Ballard must have . . . No. That couldn't be it! He scanned the bills closely. They were good ones—just like the ones Ballard had showed him at the bank. Maybe there were lots of new twenties circulating in Toro County but these made Nolan remember a lot of things he had been seeing without taking particular notice. That suicide note. The safety pin. He didn't stop to figure it all out. That could come later. Just now all he knew was that Ballard had been right. The place for Ray Nolan was in Junction City!

He reached the town just at dusk, avoiding the main street to take the two ponies to a livery stable whose owner he could trust. "Keep 'em both ready, Tip," he said briefly. "Which is the hotel Harvey Dangler owns?"

Tip knew better than to ask questions when Ray Nolan took that tone. He pointed across to a building which backed up to the stable. "Right handy," he said. "How soon do you figure to want the ponies?"

"Can't tell. Just be ready!"

The next stop was the railroad station. A couple of questions told him what he had come to expect. Joyce Weaver had bought a ticket to St. Louis but she had checked no baggage and she had not been seen to board the train.

Five minutes later he was at Dangler's Hotel. It was a long, two-story building, its saloon front flanked by a double bank of private rooms. The saloon was open for business but the blinds were drawn in the rear rooms.

There were few customers in the place at the early hour but the men who lounged around seemed curiously restless. Nolan wandered in casually and asked for a room.

The man behind the bar shook his head sourly. "No rooms," he said. "We're full up."

Nolan didn't argue. "Any other hotel in town?" he asked.

"Plenty of room at the Ace," the man said, pointing across the railroad tracks. "Second lane past the deepo."

NOLAN drifted out again, aware that a swarthy gunman had crossed to the front window to watch him. He strolled calmly across toward the Ace but cut back around a building at the first corner, backtracking until he found himself at the rear of the Dangler place. This time he caught a flicker of light behind an upstairs blind.

It didn't take him long to effect an entrance, his movements apparently unheard. The place seemed deserted but a light gleamed from a back stairway. Nolan went up silently, a heavy carpet muffling his footsteps. When his eyes reached the level of the upper hall he stopped, watching the man who sat there tipped back against the wall in a chair.

The heavy breathing seemed to indicate that the man was asleep so Nolan took a chance. Gun in hand he climbed the remaining steps, his alert glance noting that the door beside the sleeper had a key in the lock. It was the work of a moment to crash his gun

barrel down on the guard's head, the fellow sagging in his chair without a murmur.

Nolan tied and gagged him swiftly before moving on to that locked door. He let himself in, taking the precaution of removing the key from the lock before he stepped inside. The light from the hall told him that his guess had been right. There was a bound form lying on the bed. Even if he had not known what to expect he could still have recognized Joyce Weaver. Her clothing was in rags and a tight gag drew lines of agony into her face but the eyes which stared up at him were as bright as he had seen them in the street of Toro Gap. The spark was anger now instead of humor but there was no sign of fear. Obviously she had put up a whale of a scrap before they had managed to subdue her.

"Not a word," Nolan cautioned as he cut through the bonds. "The walls are thin and I don't know where the gang is. Got any clothes that we can grab in a hurry?"

She shook her head in negation. He helped her to her feet and had to hold her to keep her from falling. The touch of her did funny things to his blood pressure but he grinned quietly in the gloom. "I reckon we'll have to steal your jailer's shirt," he whispered. "I can't haul you around the country like this. Folks *would* be scandalized at you."

He practically carried her into the hall, leaving her to lean against the wall flexing cramped muscles while he stripped the guard of shirt and gunbelt. She flashed him a smile as he slipped the shirt over her head and buckled the belt over one of her shoulders.

"You'd never keep it up around your waist," he grinned.

She was puzzled but there was no time to ask questions. Footsteps sounded at the foot of the front stairway. Nolan almost shoved her down the backway, a gun booming from the shadows before he could follow. The bullet thudded into the wall beside him and he triggered a quick shot in reply. It brought a howl of pain—and his second shot sent the single lamp crashing to the floor.

INSTANTLY the building was in an uproar, shots crashing along the upper hall. A door banged downstairs but no one met them as they slipped out through the back door.

The girl kept a tight grip on his arm as they sped through the alleyway toward the livery stable. "Shouldn't we stay to help your friends?" she panted.

"No friends," he grinned. "This deal is just you and me. Keep runnin'."

Tip was ready with the horses. "Heard the shootin'," he chuckled. "Figured it had to be you so I got ready." He gulped as he saw the golden head behind Nolan. "Holy Hannah! You sure picked yourself a swell partner fer a fracas this time!"

"Thanks," Nolan grunted, boosting the girl into Krug's saddle—"for everything." They moved out into the street, keeping the ponies at a walk so as to avoid attention. The shooting had stopped now but Nolan realized that it would mean quick pursuit. The gang would be on the trail as soon as they stopped shooting at each other and found out what had happened.

It was nerve-wracking work keeping the slow pace but suddenly they were out of town and he gave the word to run for it. They rode hard until the horses had to be rested, then Nolan called a complete halt, listening for sounds of pursuit.

"Almost too easy," he chuckled after a moment. "We're in the clear, I reckon."

She ventured a question as they moved forward again. "What's this all about—and who are you?"

"I'm Ray Nolan and I'm not sure I know much about it. I just did some fancy guessing and it led me to you. Lucky!"

"But what made you . . .?"

"I'd better start at the beginning," he told her bluntly. "Your father is dead and there's evidently a plan on foot to wreck XN. I just blundered into it."

SHE was silent for some moments and and he condemned himself for having broken the news so brutally. Her voice was hard but well controlled when she finally asked, "Did Rod Pearce kill my father?"

"Not likely. When I left XN it was down in the books as suicide. Your father couldn't read or write, could he?"

"Only his name," she said, surprised. "How did you know? He always was careful with the secret."

"More guessing," he told her. "I fell for the suicide business until a gent tried to kill me. On him I found some money that I figured had been taken from you. That pointed to Rod Pearce and made me think. Pretty soon I realized that your father's suicide note was a fake. That signature of his was the writing of a man who merely traced out lines he didn't understand. It seemed queer to me that a writer like that should write so correct a letter. Then I remembered something that made me sure it was a fake. The note was pinned to his shirt with a safety pin. When Sheriff Tonner took it off I knew there was something wrong but then I wasn't suspicious. Looking back I could understand. Try pinning something on yourself with a safety pin and notice which way you push the pin. This one went in the wrong way—unless your father was left-handed, which I saw he wasn't because he wore one gun on the right side."

"You mean he was murdered and someone left a note to make it look like suicide?"

"Sure. After that it was easy to figure. Dangler evidently has some notes faked by the same clever forger who wrote the note. I reckon he wanted XN because it's so much handier to his outlaw pals. Pearce is a partner in the deal, I reckon. His game is to sit back and act like an injured party but be ready to gather up anything Dangler can't grab. You had to be eliminated for fear you'd spoil the game."

"That must be it," she murmured. "I know it was Pearce who tied me up. He tried to keep me from recognizing him—but I guess it wouldn't have mattered if you hadn't come along."

IT WAS shortly after midnight when they routed Tonner out of bed. Joyce did the telling and the sheriff went into action. At last he was going to get a crack at the bandits he had been forced to tolerate!

Within an hour most of Toro Flat's population was in a posse heading north along the rim of the canyon country. Several shady citizens had been missing in town and the fact confirmed Nolan's suspicions. "It's the next logical move," he said. "A wholesale rustling of XN cattle tonight will ruin the spread completely. Then Dangler will be sure to have his own way. You can bet that every outlaw in the badlands has been called out for the job—helped by our missing citizens. It's a chance to clean out the whole gang."

Tonner was just beginning to spot his men as pickets when the sound of firing came from the east. The posse swung quickly toward the fight, read-

ing the story in the noise of conflict. The herd had been stampeded but were running north instead of west. Now a part of the gang was trying to head them while other outlaws battled the XN riders.

The posse cut directly into the turning movement, risking the tossing horns to strike direct blows at the bandits. The rustlers broke in surprise and the herd turned away from the badlands. Then from the south a heavy burst of firing indicated that more XN riders were coming into the fight.

Nolan saw only the first phase of the battle. Joyce had refused to stay behind and he had watched her nervously as she kept her place in line. His heart seemed to skip a beat when she went down at the first exchange of shots but she opened her eyes even as he slid from the saddle and bent over her.

He grunted his relief. "You sure took a nasty tumble," he said, striving for casualness. "Any bones broken?"

She sat up, his arm about her shoulders. "I'm all right—now," she told him. "How is the fight going?"

"Sounds all right from here. I reckon the outlaws are trying to break through now and get away to the canyons."

ALMOST as he spoke two riders loomed up in the moonlight, one of them bulking large in the saddle while the other seemed tiny by comparison. Nolan started to hail them but the big man's gun boomed a vicious reply. Two of the outlaws had already broken through and were headed for the badlands.

Nolan still crouched over Joyce but his gun flamed in his hand. Twice it bucked against his palm and at each shot a saddle emptied.

"Nice shooting, bud," Joyce whispered quietly. "That little man wasn't much of a target for moonlight work."

Nolan didn't reply. He was already moving toward the fallen outlaws. Twice matches flared in his hand before he returned to find Joyce on her feet.

"First rule in my business is to let women alone," he grumbled. "Instead of tendin' to my chores I went traipsin' off after you and look what happened! I've gone and plugged the jigger I wanted to catch alive!"

"The big man was Rod Pearce, wasn't he?" she asked, ignoring his tone of complaint.

"Sure. He needed it—but I wasn't supposed to shoot that Rubens gent. He mighta done some . . ."

"So I've ruined your career," she sighed, matching his dolefulness. "I'll bet you wish you'd never met me."

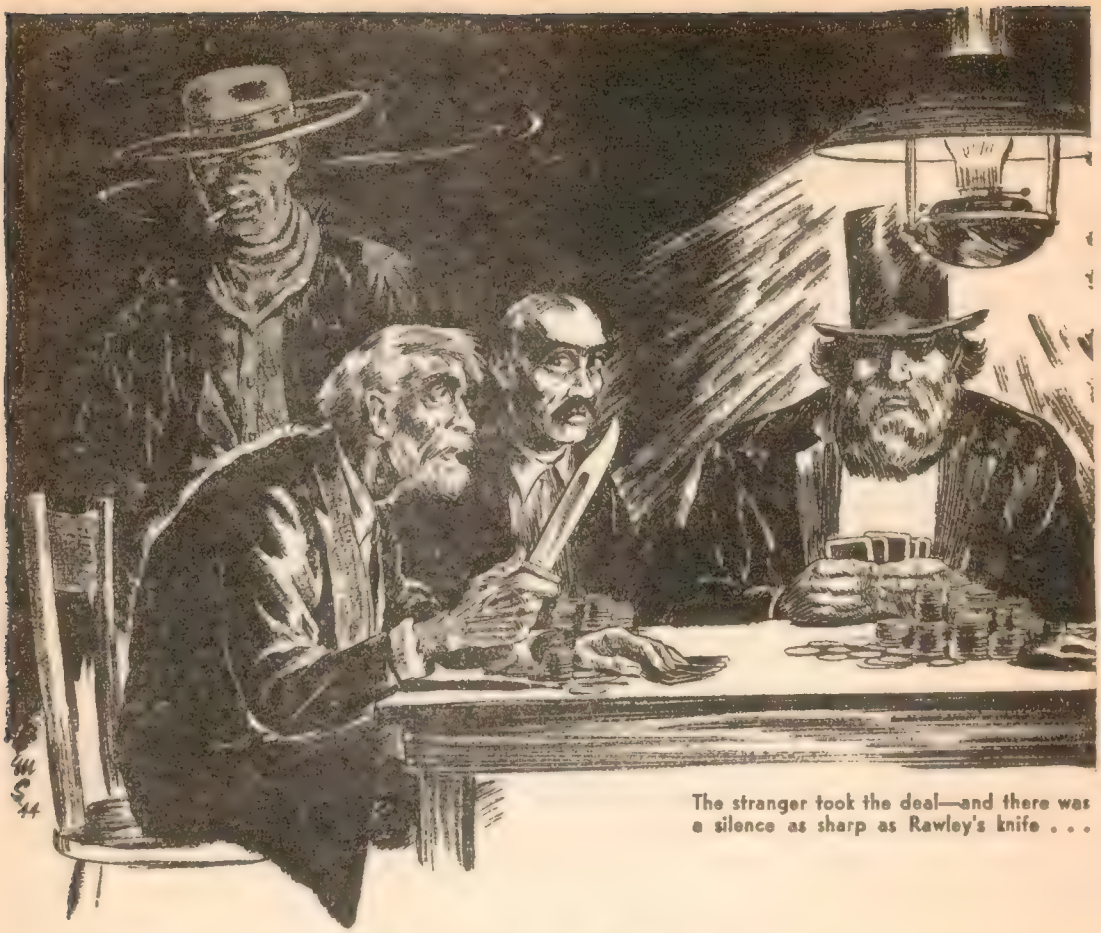
He dropped the six-gun back into leather. He was going to need the arm for another purpose. "Didn't I tell you once," he demanded, "that I'm kinda partial to women in overalls?"

THE MI-TSI-A-DA-ZI RIVER

SEVENTY-FIVE miles below the ultimate source of this river lies the Grand Canyon. The canyon is distinguished above all things by the brilliant coloring of its walls. Though every color of the spectrum is represented there, radiant hues of every description, the boldest and most predominant color is a glaring yellow. It provides the lustrous setting for all the other shades.

This characteristic which has moved all beholders so deeply had its effect upon the early Indian tribes that inhabited that country. From it the Minnetaree tribe of the Siarran family took the name *Mi-tsi-a-da-zi*, Rock Yellow River. Among the French fur trappers in that land, the name in French was Roche Jaune and Pierre Jaune. To Lewis and Clark it became Yellow Rock and Yellow Stone. Now the river and the great park bear the name Yellowstone.

—*Pete Bogg.*



The stranger took the deal—and there was a silence as sharp as Rawley's knife . . .

"DEAL 'EM DEEP, ...BUT NOT DIRTY!"

By Berkeley Livingston

OLD man Radcliff had a plan to make a man out of his son, but it backfired . . . and Death stepped in strangely!

"NOW look, Tom . . ."

Tom Radcliff twisted lazily about and leaned his back against the corral fence. "What, dad?"

"What, my foot!" Lafe Radcliff rasped. "You know what I'm going to say; the Lord knows I've said it enough. I want you to cut out this gambling! —Yes," he said, forestalling Tom's interruption, "I know . . . you're old enough to take care of yourself. Sure . . . old enough and big enough. Well, I think you're also old enough to think the responsibility that's going to be yours someday now that you've finished with that Eastern school. But then, it takes a man to think of that. And I'm beginning to wonder . . . "

Tom's face went hot in anger. "Now wait a minute, Dad," he said quickly. "That isn't fair."

"What isnt fair? My asking you to be my idea of a man?"

"No!" Tom burst in petulant anger. "But if it's your idea that I should play nursemaid to a lot of cows—"

"*Nursemaid*!" his father bawled. "Why you young . . . " He stopped as though in sudden realization that all this was useless and repetitious airing of old grievences. "All right, Tom," he went on in a controlled voice, "this may sound like preaching. But trouble and poker go hand in hand."

"And when I meet it," Tom said, grinning, "I'll know what to do."

"CHECK."

"Check."

"Check."

"Bet ten."

"And ten."

Ed Rawley looked speculatively at Tom Radcliff. Then he looked down at the cards in his hand. An ace-high straight — natural. And Tom had drawn a single card. It was obvious. Tom had drawn to fill two pair. Had he filled? The three other players threw in their cards, each commenting on the bad run of luck they seemed to be having.

Again Ed looked at his cards. They hadn't changed. It was still an ace high straight. He leaned back, head cocked at an angle and looked sharply into the grinning features of young Radcliff. At last he made up his mind.

"And ten better."

"Again."

Then Ed threw his hand in without even a call.

"That makes a hundred bucks, Tom," he said.

"And you're in me for a hundred," another said.

The other two had lost almost a hundred a piece, also. Tom had won approximately four hundred in about two hours.

"Quitting, boys?" he asked, needling them a little.

"We-ll . . . " Ed began.

A strange voice said: "Use another hand?"

Tom eyed the newcomer appraisingly.

"Sure."

It was evident from the others' expressions that this man was also a stranger to them. In the matter of dress, he was a brother to them. The Levy's, faded blue cotton shirt, Stetson, rolled brim worn low on the forehead, all proclaimed his trade: puncher. There was one thing which set him apart, however. The gun, carried low in its holster, strapped against his thigh. It made the rest think twice about asking him into the game.

Again Ed said, "We-ll . . . "

And again Tom said, "Sure, draw up a chair."

The stranger drew his brows up questioningly.

"Draw," Ed said, sourly. "Table stakes."

THE first few hands were run of the mill. Then Ed filled an ace high flush. The stranger had asked for three cards; Tom, one.

The stranger, who had opened the betting, said, "check."

The next man dropped out. Ed threw ten silver dollars onto the center of the table. The third man also dropped. Tom, the next better made it twenty. The man sitting next to him dropped out also, and the stranger fished two twenty dollar bills from the pile of green backs in front of him and threw them into the pot.

Ed's expression went sour. It was going to cost him thirty dollars just to stay. He called. Tom put sixty dollars into the pot, a forty buck raise.

The stranger's lips puckered into a silent whistle. He hestitated, looking down at the cards held close to his belly. Then, pulling the brim of his hat down until it almost completely covered his eyes, he met Tom's bet with an eighty-dollar raise. Ed gulped. He was game, however. He met the raise. Tom hiked the pot a hundred and sixty dollars' worth. This time the stranger just called. But not Ed; he had enough.

The stranger's full house wasn't good enough. Tom had four treys. He had thrown them off the track by drawing one card.

At the end of an hour's play, Tom had all the money in the game. And most

of it was the stranger's. When Tom finished counting his winnings, it came to a total of four thousand dollars.

"Mighty profitable evenin', wasn't it, Tom?" Ed asked.

Oddly enough Tom had stopped grinning. There had been something queer about the whole evening; something that had set it apart. For example, Tom's father. He had never been niggardly when it came to giving Tom money. But because of their argument, Tom had expected a refusal to his request of ten dollars. Instead, he got a hundred. Then the game had been different. Usually, it was five-ten-and fifteen-cent poker. This night Ed had suggested table stakes. Tom had wondered about that. Ed was a foreman on a ranch and could play that kind of game. But the others were just ordinary punchers who worked for their eighty a month and found.

He had been wondering about that when the stranger had walked in the game. Then he thought, what the hell, they weren't children. If a man can't afford to lose, let him stay out of the game. Something made him suddenly look at the stranger. He had slid his chair away from the table. And Tom noticed for the first time what a tough looking character he was. Those narrow-set eyes, hooded, like a snake's; a hawk-nose, nostrils flaring now in anger. The stranger's hand was sliding toward his thigh—

A hoarse voice said, "Reach—up!"

Tom's eyes went wide in startled surprise. Confronting them was a character right from the stories of the fabled West. Dressed completely in black, from the kerchief which covered the lower part of his face, to his boots. Even his sombrero was black. But most menacing were the two guns held so competently in his hands.

For an instant silence greeted his command. Then six pair of hands went skyward. The man in black holstered one of his guns and reaching into a pocket, pulled out a sack. He thrust it at Tom.

"Shove the dough in here."

Tom did as he was bid.

Taking the bag, the gunman spoke again. "Let's go son!" he said.

"Who, me?" Tom asked in surprise.

"Yep—c'mon, let's go."

The others at the table sat as though turned to stone. But in the eyes of each was the same expression; wary watchfulness. As if he had read their thoughts, the masked man said, "Take it easy, gents. I don't want anyone to get hurt."

Before anyone could do anything about it, the holdup man had shepherded Tom through the door.

"ALL right, son, this is it."

Wearily, Tom slid from the bay he had been riding for the six hours which had passed since the holdup. Every muscle, bone and nerve in his body ached from the pounding of the ride. The masked man had forced Tom to set a furious pace through the sage and brush for the first two hours. Oddly enough there hadn't been the slightest sound of pursuing hoofbeats. Then, as if by magic, they had been in the mountains. And still the other had forced the pace. Then the brush ended and there was only rock and shale. After that they had gone more slowly. And now they were at their destination, wherever that was.

The gray-blue light of dawn showed only the mountains all about and the distorted shape of mesquite and mountain elm.

"Well," tom grunted, "what now?"

"Breakfast. Get it."

'Huh?"

"In the shack. Get it."

"You're nuts!"

The hold-up man removed his belt with its heavy load of cartridges and guns. After throwing it across the pommel of his saddle, he turned and came toward Tom. There was something ominous in his slow approach, something deadly.

"Get!" he whispered hoarsely.

Tom moved then—but not in the direction of the shack, now taking shape in the growing light. Instead, it was forward to meet the still masked man.

Tom struck the first blow. It was like hitting a hunk of granite. Three times Tom hit him before the other even moved. Then the other flicked out a paw, in much the same manner as does a bear, and with much the same effect. It was more a slap than a blow. Yet it sent Tom reeling.

Recovering his balance, Tom came charging in again. And again the other let him get close. This time Tom brought a grunt of pain from the mass of muscle; one of Tom's swings landed flush on the nose. Before Tom had a chance to pursue his apparent advantage, the other caught him with a right and left. Tom's senses left him in a flash of whirling comets which ended in the blackness of unconsciousness.

TOM Radcliff gasped as the water hit him. He sat erect, shaking his head hard, to clear it of the cobwebs which seemed to have enmeshed it. He blinked away the water drops and stared blearily at the huge shape bent over him.

The mask had been removed and he started in dazed incomprehension at the thick, beetle-browed face peering intently into his. Then he remembered the fight and started to come to his feet.

"Take it easy, lad," the stranger said. He still held the water bucket in one hand.

"What the hell was the idea of slugging me?" Tom snarled.

"Still cocky, aren't you?" the other said, thick lips parted in a grin. "Looks like I'll have to take it out of you yet."

Tom got to his feet. His jaw ached intolerably. Beetle-brow could hit.

"Okay," Tom said. "I'll be good. But tell me one thing. Now that you got me here, what are you gonna do with me?"

"Put you to work. What you think I want, company?"

"I wouldn't know. Then why?"

"Hell! I don't want you under my feet. I'll know where you are this way."

Tom had been sizing up the land while they had been talking. He saw a huge dump heap of ore tailings not far off. And beyond it he saw the opening of a tunnel in the side of the hill.

"You mean in there?"

"Sure. Tunnel's full of muck. Someone's got to get it out. Might as well start now."

Through the years, seepage had packed the muck down hard. It was like picking at concrete. Whoever had worked the tunnel previously had gone in a good nine hundred feet. At the point of the working, the tunnel was only five feet wide and seven feet high. The humidity was so high Tom found it necessary to work stripped to the waist.

The first few days were torture. His hands blistered and became raw from the pick and shovel. Too, the rail bed had been laid badly, so the business of wheeling the dump truck was a back-breaking job. It would have been a natural trait to have complained. But in Tom's mind there was room for only two thoughts—escape, and revenge!

He thought escape would be an easy matter. It wasn't. Tom worked in the tunnel all day. Then, after supper, Beetle-brow locked him in the cabin. Not that the cabin was an escape-proof

prison. It was only a clapboard and tar paper affair. But Tom wanted not only escape. He also wanted to bring back with him this hulk of a man who forced him to labor so unreasonably.

After the first few days, the other relaxed his vigilance somewhat. But never to the extent of laying his guns aside carelessly, or permitting Tom to get behind him. Then, too, he told the reason for holding him prisoner. They were having their supper one night, when he said:

"You're my insurance, son. They're going to trail me here. If things get hot, I'll use you to strike a bargain."

"How do you mean?"

"Either I escape or you go down with me."

"You don't think I'll be a party to that, do you?"

The other slapped the gun butts at his hips, suggestively.

"These'll do the thinking then," he said. . .

What Tom though; he kept to himself. But he knew sometime soon the other would relax his guard enough to give him a chance at the guns. That was all Tom wanted, an even break.

IT WAS almost two weeks to the day, when Tom, deep in the tunnel, heard the sound of voices. Cautiously, trying hard not to make a sound, he make his way toward them. Beetle-brow usually sat guard, not far from the tunnel entrance. As Tom came closer to the portal the voices became more distinct. First he heard Beetle-brow's rumbling tones:

"What the hell do you want?"

Someone answered, "money."

It was a familiar voice. Tom knew he heard it before. Where?

"What money?" Beetle-brow asked.

"Don't give me that," the other replied. "You know what I'm talking about."

Then Tom was in the open and knew why the voice was so familiar. It was the stranger who had sat in the game that night.

Five feet separated the two men. The stranger held a gun on Beetle-brow, and from the expression on his face, was prepared to use it.

"Come on," he snarled. "Where's it?"

Beetle-brow's eyes flickered toward a saddle bag thrown over a nearby rock. It was enough.

"Get it," the other commanded.

Beetle-brow made a half turn, then went for his gun in a furious clawing move. And the stranger's gun spat flame and death for him. Before Tom, fixed in horrified immobility, could move, the stranger had caught up the saddle bag and was racing for his horse.

Tom came out of his trance just as the other reached the horse. He made the mistake of shouting "Stop!" The horsemen turned and sent a couple of shots in his direction. They went high, and Tom ducked behind a boulder. Then the killer was gone.

EVEN as Tom unbuckled the dead man's gun belt, he puzzled over the killer's choice of escape route. The man had gone up, over the crest of the peak on which the mine was located. But Tom knew, from his daily walk to and from the tunnel, that the best path for a horse was back the way they had come. He knew, however, that he was going to follow, no matter where the trail led. Quickly harnessing on the belt, he ran for the horses not far off. The killer gained a percious ten minutes while Tom saddled the bay. Finished, Tom set the other horse loose and slapping it on the rump, set her off down the back trail. She would head for human habitation. Then he started in

pursuit of the killer.

He brought his horse up sharp at the crest of the ridge. He knew then, where he was. Straight ahead in the far distance, Split Butte's twin escarpments showed their ugly barren heads. To the left, the mountain fell, cliff-like, sheer, to a dry canyon bed, a thousand feet below. To the right was the steeply angled slope of Flint Head Mountain.

It had been a matter of ten years since he had been here. But it was still clear in his memory. The trail led downward, following the twisting contours of Flint Head, until it reached the canyon. There it became a broad highway of rock, rubble and quartz outcropping until it spread out into the wide desert which engulped Split Butte.

Tom's lips went taut. It wasn't going to be the easiest job in the world, running the killer to earth. He gave the bay his head, down the twisting trail.

"The double-crossing killer," he whispered to himself. "A split of the money wasn't enough. He had to have the whole hog. I wonder," he mussed, body swaying easily to the horse's motion, "how they found dad's claim?"

His speculation was cut short by the petering out of the trail. One look showed Tom that the killer had at least a mile lead on him. And the canyon bed was not the best kind of racetrack. The desert would be even worse.

Intuitively he rode with loose reins, letting the horse set the pace and choose the road. Up ahead the killer had already entered the eroded wasteland of the desert. A tiny cloud of dust marked his trail. Tom pause momentarily. He had to decide, here and now, which of two alternatives to take. He knew the killer's destination, Split Butte. Should he go back, pick up a posse at Road Forks, and return? Or should he take the more hazardous chance of following him, alone? He had to make up his mind quickly, for already the pursued was entering the first of a series of shallow gullies that pockmarked the forepart of the desert.

That he might have to pay a penalty for his daring, did not occur to him. The man was a killer. And had to be brought to justice. That was the prime factor in his consideration. Even the four thousand dollars he had with him was of secondary importance. Tom set his course straight for the gully into which the killer had disappeared.

* * *

SHERIFF JOE DUDLEY threw his back and roared in laughter. Lafe Radcliff's chuckle came out in a low echo.

"And so," said the sheriff, when he had recovered his breath, "You hired Big Ben to stick up the game. What did it cost you?"

"Five hundred for Ben. A hundred each for the punchers. Ed wouldn't take a dime. Said he'd have more fun using his own money."

Dudley turned serious. "What about the stranger?"

"I told him not to worry. He'd get his money."

Dudley shook his head in admiration. Only shrewd old Lafe Radcliff could think up something like this. A faked poker game. And then the holdup at the end.

"Tell me, Lafe" he asked, "What if the youngster kicks up a row?"

Radcliff's lips tightened into a straight line. It was evident he was determined that Tom had to stand or fall on his actions.

"I told Ben to manhandle him. Oh, not badly, of course. After all, he is my son. But by all that's holy, Joe, I'v my mind set on his doing some labor. Even at the point of a gun."

"Where have you got him?"

"Remember that silver proposition I

bought out several years ago?"

"Not the one up in the Santa Anita range?"

Radcliff nodded.

Dudley whistled sharply. He knew the claim.

"What's Tom going to do in there?" Then as Radcliff kept silent. "No, Lafe, not that muck in the tunnel?"

"Why not?"

"Man! There must be a thousand tons of rock there."

"So?"

"I get it. Kill or cure, is that it?"

Radcliff's hands went wide. It was answer enough.

"When do you want to go up there, Lafe?"

"Well, Saturday'll make two weeks. I figure that ought to be long enough."

* * *

SILENCE greeted Dudley's knock at the cabin door.

Radcliff grinned in understanding.

"Must be in the tunnel," he said.

The portal of the mine was hidden from their sight by a shoulder of a nearby hill.

"I still don't get it," Dudley drawled, as they struggled up the steep grade of he hill. "Why do you need me?"

"Don't you see? If—"he hesitated, then quickly went on, "if Tom's made good, it would hurt him bad to find out it was all a put up job."

"Don't worry, Lafe," the sheriff said in sudden pity. His arm went around the other's shoulder in affection, as he continued, "I'll put on an act that'll fool even you."

The dump truck stood, looking somehow forlorn and useless on the huge pile of tailings. Dudley's senses quickened. The mine tunnel held an emptiness of life too obvious to be ignored.

They both saw the body at the same time. Big Ben lay sprawled at the tunnel entrance, twisted grotesquely in one of death's horrible postures. The back of his head had been shot away. Dudley knelt beside the body for a second. Then he looked up at the horror-filled face of Radcliff.

Radcliff moistened dry lips.

"Let's look," was Dudley's suggestion.

The tunnel was empty. There was a dump truck set up close to the muck line. Several sheets set up along the wall showed that Tom had been working. But of Tom there was no sign. A further investigation brought to light the fact that whoever had been there had taken the dead man's guns.

Radcliff was a tired and conscience-stricken old man by the time they came out of the tunnel.

"What'll we do?" he asked in a weary tone.

Dudley looked down at a tangled cluster of hoof prints and bent to examine them.

"See," he said, "one went back, along the ledge. And two went up over the ridge."

"How do you know?"

Dudley pointed to the hoofprints. Their imprint was plain in the earth.

This one," he explained, "had a ridge in the shank. The mark's starting to fade. It's headed straight up along the trail. These are fresher, and they're following."

Radcliff understood. "Let's go," he said, starting for the horses.

* * *

THE eroded soil lay thick and loose on the gulley bed down which Tom Radcliff traveled. Hoof prints marked the trail, plainly and inexorably. Tom's eyes narrowed in determination and his heels kicked hard at the horse's belly, quickening his pace. For an hour they rode in savage pursuit yet did not gain sight of his quarry. Once a small cloud of dust showed Tom he was still on the

right track. Here the man had set his horse sliding down the side of the gully. A feeling akin to exultation took hold of him. The showdown was near.

They came hard past the rounded shoulder of a gully and Tom brought his horse to a panting, quivering halt. Confronting him was the edge of a low mesa. The road forked to either side of the huge redoubt. And the surface of both trails was granite-hard rock.

Which road to take? A crooked grin showed under the stubble of his beard. A wrong choice might mean death. Already the desert was showing its fangs. The sun was a furnace from which there was no escape. The ground threw the heat back at him in blistering waves. His lips were cracked, his thighs burned from the intolerable heat of the saddle and worse, the horse was beginning to show the first signs of a breakdown.

"C'mon, horse," he said in soft urgency, "let's get going. Trail's end can't be too far off."

It was almost as if the horse understood. His ugly hammer-head jerked in the direction of the left fork.

Time became meaningless to Tom. It was as if they were chasing a mirage. The gully bed narrowed in its twisting, tortuous path until they seemed to be riding in a groove from which there was no escape.

Then, abruptly, as if by decree, they were out of the washes and gullies and into the flat desert. Split Butte was five miles away. Tom's weary, sand-encrusted eyelids flickered in startled surprise. The killer was only a couple of hundred yards ahead.

It was as if the man had expected it. For he turned in his saddle and pulled a carbine from a saddle holster. The 30-30 cracked loudly in the still air of the desert.

Tom bent low in the saddle and began a zig-zag race toward the other. Once again the rifle spoke. Hot lead furrowed a burning streak across the flesh of Tom's side. But every time the other fired, he lost a few yards. If only Tom could get close enough. . . .

Then they were separated by only a hundred yards and for the first time Tom was able to use one of the two pistols he wore. He fired once and again and still a third time. It was no use. The range was too long for accurate pistol work.

The other changed direction. Turning at right angles, he rode hard and fast for his new objective, a rock-ribbed mesa a hundred yards away. Tom groaned in despair at the sight. His own horse was heaving in the throes of his mighty labor. He knew it was only a matter of minutes before the animal's last strength was spent. If the killer reached the shelter of the mesa he would make good his escape.

Again Tom used his pistol. Used it until the hammer clicked uselessly on an empty cartridge. But now the shots were coming closer. Little streaks of dust raced past the gunman's horse. Tom let the empty gun drop and pulled the other gun free. Bending low, he took careful aim and squeezed the trigger gently—just as his horse's right forehoof came down on the edge of a gopher hole. He was almost thrown from the saddle. Worse, the gun was jerked from his hand.

And then the killer was in the shadow of the mesa.

TOM was making little whistling sounds in his nostrils. Breath laboring hard in his throat.

"Please, horse," he begged, "just a little bit longer."

The other had already disappeared from view. Then Tom saw the cut running up the side of the mesa. He took it. On top was smooth rock, ideal

running ground. Then Tom was racing level with the killer. But the other heard the sound of the hoofbeats. He looked up and an evil grin came to life on the tight narrow features; leered triumphantly through the slitted eyes. Tom was a perfect target against the skyline. Almost leisurely he brought the Remington to bear, not on Tom, but on the horse. The stock rested hard against his cheek as he sighted along the barrel. He couldn't miss. The horses were riding neck and neck; one above and one below. Now Tom's was a little ahead.

The killer fired, but the result wasn't quite what he expected. The horse crumpled in death, but Tom was no longer on his back.

Tom had launched himself straight at the other in a headlong dive. His timing was perfect. The killer was too surprised to do anything except throw his hands upward in an intuitive gesture, as Tom's body came catapulting down at him. He was swept from the horse as if he were a matchstick.

The two lay on the sand: both dazed as a result of the collision. The killer came to his senses first. He arose, backing slowly from the other, clawing for the gun at his side. His hand found only emptiness. The fall had knocked the gun from the holster. He turned, eyes frantically searching for the missing weapon. It was nowhere to be seen. Then he remembered the rifle.

But it, too, was out of reach. It lay just beyond Tom's still prone body. The killer tried to leap over Tom, but Tom's hand caught a leg. In an instant they were rolling madly around on the sand. There was but one thought in their minds. *Kill.*

They broke clear and came erect. They circled, sparring for an opening. Tom feinted with his body and the killer came in. Tom's fist smashed hard against the other's nose. But it was a short-lived triumph, for it permitted the other to come in close. Once again Tom scored, this time connecting with the man's mouth. The killer's knee found Tom's groin, shot blinding, stomach-turning pain through him. His arms fell, useless, to his sides, and the world spun in dizzying circles. Once more the knee came. Tom's mouth opened wide in a soundless expression of agony.

"God," he thought, as he stumbled away from the other, "what a hell of a way to go down." But he still stood.

THERE was no escape this time for him. The killer's eyes were as cold as the death he was going to deal out. He had his man and he knew it. He picked up the rifle.

Tom's chest heaved spasmodically. A terrible weight seemed to be pressing him down. His body was a dead thing, insofar as feeling was concerned. Only his mind seemed alive. And it was helpless to interfere with the fate that was about to engulf him.

Slowly the killer backed away until ten feet separated them. Tom became hypnotized with his movements. It was like watching a snake getting set for the kill. Slowly, the rifle barrel came up, until it was pointing at Tom's middle.

The killer's mouth twisted into a grin. He had the desire to see his victim squirm.

"Maybe—" he gloated over each word, as if he found a sort of twisted satisfaction in what he was about to do. "Maybe I won't kill you. Maybe I'll just cripple you. Ah . . ."

Tom didn't think it was possible to sweat in the desert. But now he felt clammy wetness on his face.

"No! No! Wait," he hoarsely pleaded. His legs bent at the knees in

sudden weakness and he held his hands before him in a piteous gesture.

The killer laughed aloud at the sight. This was even better than he had expected. This guy was crawling. Just like his guts were all in his mouth.

"Please," Tom begged, as he came toward the other in slow, wavering steps. "Please don't—" and then he had left his feet in a diving tackle.

It caught the other completely by surprise. So completely, that he could only stare at the hurtling body already on him. His legs were swept from under him. The rifle flew from his fingers, out past Tom's head. This time Tom fought as a savage would, with feet and fist and teeth. The sheer savagery of the attack made futile the other's attempt at defense.

They rolled wildly across the brown sand, first one on top, then the other. Once Tom had the other by the throat, but crooked yellow teeth sank deep in his wrist, forcing him to let go. Then the other was behind Tom, the weight of his body thrown across Tom's back, pinning him face down on the sand. He pulled Tom's right arm up across his back in a hammerlock. The arm came higher and higher until the pain of it was beyond enduring. He felt the heavy panting breath of the man on his neck. And brought his head back sharply.

It smacked with a heart-satisfying thud against the gunman's mouth, splitting his lips and sending a splatter of blood down the back of Tom's neck.

The killer released his grip, rolled away from Tom. He staggered to his feet. He swayed drunkenly for a second, then staggered waveringly for the gun, a few feet off. And this time Tom was helpless to stop him. He lay, propped up on an elbow, and watched with dull apathy, the gun trained on him. It didn't seem to matter much, any more.

He saw the rifle steady for a second, saw the fingers tighten relentlessly on the trigger, and heard the blasting sound of its fire.

* * *

LAFE RADCLIFF peered into the desert haze through slitted eyes. He shook his head in frustration. Dudley regarded him somberly.

"Doesn't look good, does it Lafe?"

"Nope."

"What do you think?"

"Gotta go on. They're somewhere in there."

"Lafe! Don't be a—hell, man. What's the use? They might be anywhere in this wilderness. We've lost their trail. And we don't have the water to go on."

"Then I'll go on alone."

The other sighed. "Okay, you stubborn old burro, lead on."

The horses' heads drooped in weariness. They were as spent as the men. But they responded to the goading of the spurs.

Another hour went by. An hour in which Lafe tasted the bitterness of despair with the realization that they were on a hopeless quest. Wearily, he turned to Dudley. "No use, Joe. The cards are stacked against us."

Dudley nodded wordlessly. He had seen the futility of their search a long time before. He sawed gently at the reins to bring the horse back to face in the direction from which they'd come. And saw two figures come out of the haze . . . A horse and a man. But the man wasn't on the horse. He was leading. It was Lafe who recognized the man.

"Tom," he yelled hoarsely. "It's Tom!"

THEY forced water between Tom's cracked lips with gentle fingers.

They kept looking at the dead body slung across the horse but wisely refrained from asking questions.

It was a good half hour before Tom was able to talk.

". . . So I watched him finger the trigger, and knew that nothing on this earth could save me . . ." He stopped and closed his eyes at the memory.

"Yeah?"

"So?"

"I guess he was so intent on killing me, he didn't look at the gun."

This time they kept silent.

"It was clogged with sand. And when he pressed the trigger, the barrel burst wide open. A hunk of steel took him square between the eyes. It makes a guy feel pretty humble to realize something higher than he is has saved his worthless hide . . ."

Clumsily old Lafe put his hand on Tom's shoulder.

Tom's fingers closed hard around his father's hand. "Remember that section of land up near Flint Head?"

Softly the old man said, "Yes . . ."

"Well, I won four thousand dollars that night."

"Yes?"

"Well—I think if someone cleared it of brush it'd make good cattle country."

THE END

DOUBLE-DEALING . . . WESTERN STYLE

AMONG the wholesale atrocities the white man has committed against the Indians, there is none more brutal to be found on the black pages of America's early history than the Blackfeet Massacre of 1843. It occurred in a trading post deep in wild Western territory, Fort McKenzie, and the principal white men involved were Francis A. Chardon and Alexander Harvey. Neither of the men could be labeled "scrupulous." Both were known to have fierce tempers, to harbor grudges, and encourage double-dealing. Harvey's reputation was so bad that at one time the fur company for which he worked attempted to fire him. For a cross country trek in the dead of winter, the company officials wished to reward him and decided to keep him on the pay-roll. On his return to the fort, Harvey accosted the officials who had presented the case for his dismissal and gave each of them a severe beating. He was known to shoot men down in cold blood for no apparent reason. Chardon was just as much the blackguard.

The tragedy which occurred at Fort McKenzie began through a misunderstanding. Francis A. Chardon was the trader in charge of the post. He lived in comparative luxury even to the point of having several negro servants. Accidentally, one of Chardon's servants was killed by a member of the Blackfeet Tribe. That tribe had always been friendly to the white man in that region. They traded at Fort McKenzie, bringing in huge collections of pelts regularly.

Chardon intended to get revenge. He talked the matter over with Harvey. Harvey agreed to attend to all the details. The plan was laid; preparations were made to carry them through at the proper time.

In the minds of these two men germinated the idea for a "double-cross" on a gigantic scale. The next time the friendly chieftains and their tribes came to trade, the cannon of the fort would be trained upon the entrance gate. Two or three of the chiefs would be admitted, and while the door was crowded with Indians the cannon would be discharged. The three chiefs, of course, would be massacred. It was expected that the rest of the Indians would be so panic-stricken that they would run, leaving their horses, fur, and equipment.

The plan only partly succeeded. The signals were not properly understood, for the cannon did not go off at the right moment. When the Indians entered Chardon opened fire on the chiefs, but before Harvey could set off the cannon the rest of them had begun to scatter. Chardon and Harvey were disappointed in their efforts. They had no loot to show for the wanton killing, and the number murdered only came to three.

The thirst for blood and vengeance must have still been strong within the two white men. Harvey killed the one victim who was still alive. With knife in hand he hacked at the fallen warriors. The white "savage" still remained unsatisfied. With wild screams and threats which he augmented by waving pistol and knife in the air, Harvey forced the bereaved squaws to dance a scalp dance around the scalps of their fallen mates.

The Bloody Massacre of 1843 was not soon forgotten by the Blackfeet tribes. The personal revenge of two selfish, vain, and brutal men was responsible for a wave of terror which swept through the new areas of settlement in our pioneer West.

—George Marks

It was a mad battle on the cliff edge

FIGHTERS By Cleggett Clark

JOHN COLTER

He was one of the most famous "lone wolf" fighters of the Old West, and his name is part of our history

STANDING among the foremost of the solitary explorers of the West is the name of John Colter. No statesman or leader, Colter is remembered first for the part he played in the opening of the Northwest. But more important, he is remembered as a symbol of the undaunted courage and incredible endurance that was the life of the frontiersman.

Colter's early life is cloaked in mystery. We know that he was born in the year of the beginning of the great Revolutionary War. He was the son of two sturdy pioneer parents who had thrust their way to the rugged outpost of Kentucky. There, in the rough and tumble town of Louisville, John was born, and there he spent his youth.

Unfortunately the records tell us nothing more of his history until 1804. Now he was a strapping six-footer, broad and brawny, and an expert shot. He enlisted in that famous expedition that held the attention of the nation for three years, the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

In the records of this famous journey, Colter's name appears several times. Upon each occasion he is seen to be a loyal and courageous aide to the great leaders and often received their admiration and praise. He acted primarily as a hunter, preceding the main group and bringing in food for the camp. His good work is attested to by references of Captain Clark.

It was on the return trip of the expedition that the adventures of Colter really began. The group reached Fort Mordan in 1806 and this incident is recorded in the journal under the date of August 15 and 16, 1806.

"In the evening we were applied to by one of our men, Colter, who was desirous of joining the two trappers who had accompanied us, and who now proposed an expedition up the river, in which they were to find traps and give him a share of the profits. The offer was a very advantageous one, and, as he had always performed his duty, and his services might be dispensed with, we agreed that he might go, provided none of the rest would ask or expect a similar indulgence. To this they cheerfully answered that they wished Colter every success and would not apply for liberty to separate before we reached St. Louis. We therefore supplied him, as did his comrades also, with powder, lead, and a variety of articles which might be useful to him, and he left us the next day."

Even to these mighty explorers, the journey of this quiet, self-contained man back to the wilderness from which he was only now emerging after more than two years seemed strange and mysterious. Their journal speaks of this lure of the solitary woods and its facility for easily overcoming the "delightful prospects of living again in the settled frontier towns."

But Colter was willing to give up these "delightful prospects" for the rugged life of a woodsman and trapper. He and his friends made their way to the upper rivers by dangerous and difficult routes. They spent the winter of 1806 in this region. Their success or failure remains unrecorded. In the spring of 1807, Colter started out once more for St. Louis.

He traveled completely alone by log canoe and made his way in safety as far as the mouth of the Platte River. Here he was surprised by a party of fur trappers who hailed him to their camp for a talk. The party was under the leadership of the noted trapper, Manuel Lisa.

Lisa was immediately impressed by this tall, sturdy, lone-wolf that he met coming from unknown country. He saw, too, the great value to his efforts of having someone that recently came from the Missouri headwaters, someone who was already acquainted with the land, its streams, its trails, and its dangers.

Lisa argued long and hard to convince Colter to join him. We do not know what prizes he offered him to relinquish his journey to St. Louis, but in the end he won his point and Colter agreed. For the third time this man of the woods turned his back on civilization and his face to uncharted mystery.

Unfortunately for posterity, Manuel Lisa left no account of his strenuous activities in the upper Missouri. For that reason we can only piece together from various reports, all authentic, however, the history of Colter's exploits.

Lisa knew that he could expect trouble from the powerful Indian tribe that held sway in this new

country. The Blackfeet were a war-like, predatory tribe that lived almost always in a state of conflict with their neighbors. They were magnificent physical specimens, proud and belligerent. Their bitter hatred toward the white man had been established when, on the return trip of the Lewis and Clark expedition through their country, the unfortunate incident had occurred in which Captain Lewis had shot and killed one of their tribe.

For this reason, it is thought, Manuel Lisa built his first establishment on the Yellowstone River in the country of the Crows, the traditional enemies of the Blackfeet. Strangely enough, a few weeks after he had arrived, a party of his trappers met a band of Blackfeet who were friendly to the whites and said they bore no ill will over the Lewis incident since he had obviously acted under the greatest provocation. While this probably was subterfuge, Lisa took them at their word for he was anxious to establish friendly relationships with all the tribes in that country. The success of his venture depended upon the amount of cooperation he could receive from them.

As an envoy to the tribes Lisa picked the man who obviously knew more about that country than all of the rest of them put together. John Colter was chosen to make his way to the various tribes for the purpose of bringing them in to the fort to trade. Without further ado, Colter took his thirty pound pack, his gun, and some ammunition and set out for the camp of the Crow nation, a mere five hundred miles away.

This was wild country to travel. Only in barest outline had it been mapped by Lewis and Clark. Streams and trails had to be found and made—but this remarkable man set out, as if it were a journey to a next-door neighbor!

His journey, however, did not prove uneventful. After making his way to the Crow nation, he set out for several other tribes. Traveling in the company of a party of Crow Indians, he became suddenly involved in one of those murderous struggles that constantly flared between that nation and the warlike Blackfeet. They were suddenly attacked by these marauding warriors, and a bitter battle took place. Colter fought ably and vigorously, and in the course of the fight received a painful wound in the leg. They beat off the Blackfeet, however, and Colter played no small part in the victory.

He decided to give up the rest of his mission and to return to Lisa's fort. He parted company with the Crows and began the perilous journey alone. This journey was made despite the most trying circumstances, over a new and dangerous route and with the handicap of a wounded leg. It was one of the most celebrated performances in the history of American exploration, and it undoubtedly entitled him to lasting distinction, but honors of a more perilous nature still awaited him.

Besides acting as a good will emissary to the Indian tribes, Colter worked regularly as one of Lisa's trappers. He would go out at regular intervals to set beaver traps in that rich country. Many times he would return to the fort, his canoe laden with the booty of the traps that were bringing great profits to the expedition.

It was upon one of these many excursions from Lisa's fort to the forks of the Missouri for beaver that the following adventure took place. This was in the autumn of 1808, and Colter had firmly established himself in the eyes of his comrades as a man of moral strength and undoubted veracity. His physical prowess, moreover, was already becoming legendary—especially the speed and agility which he demonstrated on many occasions.

Well, it was during this autumn of 1808 that Colter set out for beaver. His companion was a fellow soldier in the Lewis and Clark expedition and is known only by his last name, Potts. They traveled each in a canoe, carrying with them several beaver traps which they were to set.

Their route was upstream, near the Jefferson Fork of the Missouri, not far above the junction with the Madison River where the two streams were separated by about five miles of bottom land. Their journey that morning was especially peaceful and pleasant with the refreshing autumn breeze cooling them as they pushed upstream.

Suddenly they heard a noise along the banks of the stream like the tramping of many buffalo. Their eyes searched the bank, but all view of the surrounding country was cut off by the high shores and brushwood bordering the water. Colter, feeling the uneasiness which comes to men long trained in battles with the Indian, suggested that they turn back. His partner, however, laughed at his nervousness. The sound was buffalo, he said.

Colter hesitated to dispute the point. It could be buffalo, he reasoned. Shrugging his shoulders he kept his canoe beside his partners. The uneasiness, however, would not wear off.

Suddenly they heard the same sound again. This time it came louder and closer. Out of the brushwood swarmed hundreds of brown bodies, and lined upon either side of the stream they watched the two men quietly and patiently.

The men stopped rowing. "Blackfeet," whispered Colter harshly. They looked at each other with faces that were strained and suddenly ashen. Then, dropping their beaver traps in the water, they directed their canoes slowly toward the bank of the river where the chiefs of the tribe stood beckoning them.

As the prow of Pott's canoe struck the shore, an Indian seized his gun. Colter leaped out and wrenched the gun away handing it back to Pott's. To Colter's consternation, Pott's pushed off from the bank as if to try to escape.

"Come back," Colter yelled. "We're surrounded. You'll never make it!"

Even as he called to him an arrow from the shore struck Potts in the thigh and dropped him to the bottom of the canal.

"Are you hurt?" asked Colter.

"Yes, and too badly to escape. Save yourself if you can. I'll get one of them at least before I go." He dragged himself to a sitting position, leveled his gun, and shot an Indian standing on the shore, killing him instantly. The sound of his shot had barely died away when the canoe was riddled with a fusilade of shots, cutting it and the man within it to shreds. The Indians rushed into the water and pulled the body to the shore. There they tore it limb from limb, throwing the pieces into Colter's face.

Then they turned on Colter. Roughly, they ripped all the clothes from his body. As he stood there naked, they argued violently over the method of his death. They were prepared to put him up as a target for their arrows when a chief silenced their shouts. They backed away as he came to Colter and spoke.

Seizing him by the shoulder, the chief asked him if he could run fast. Immediately perceiving the chief's intention, Colter cunningly replied that he was a very poor runner. The chief, instructing the tribe to remain stationary, led his intended victim to a point three or four hundred yards away. Then the chief pointed to the Madison River six miles away and told him "to save himself if he could."

With a wild war whoop, the entire tribe set off after their human quarry. Colter ran as he had never run before. This was no race in sport for a friendly wager. This was a violent race for life with his fate sealed if he lost.

Across the bottom land sped the naked man. His path lay over a plain abounding with prickly pear that cut and tore his feet as he ran. Ahead of him lay the Madison River, a refuge if he could reach it in time to hide from his pursuers.

Halfway across the plain, he ventured a glance backward. To his great joy he saw that the Indians were very much scattered and that he had gained considerable ground from the main body. One Indian, however, was very much ahead of the rest. He carried a spear, and was now only a hundred yards away.

He surged on. Only one man to out-distance and he could hope for the life that he had seemed to have lost. With a renewed burst of energy he flung himself violently ahead. His legs were growing tired; his lungs seemed ready to burst. The faint gleam of hope forced him to exert himself even more, until now the blood gushed freely from his nostrils and his body was covered with it as he ran.

Only a mile from the river, he looked back again. His heart sank. Only twenty yards behind was the determined warrior; his face gleamed with the hatred for his enemy. The spear was raised now, and Colter expected any second to feel its point sink into his back.

Feeling now that all was lost, Colter suddenly stopped. He turned his face to the Indian and raised his arms. The Indian, startled by this sudden action, tried to stop too. But, exhausted from the run, he tripped as he threw his spear, and it struck the ground and broke in his hand. Colter snatched up the pointed part and instantly pinned him to the earth. Then he began to run again.

When the pursuing Indians came to the body of their dead comrade they set up an awful yell. Howling wildly, they lashed on toward Colter who now had reached the skirting of the cottonwood trees. He heard their screams in the distance as he plunged into the river.

Fortunately, a little below this place there was an island, and against its upper point a raft of drift timber had lodged. He dived under the raft, and after several efforts got his head above water, among the trunks of trees covered over with smaller wood to the depth of several feet. He had scarcely hid himself when the Indians arrived screeching and howling. They searched through the undergrowth, the banks, the river, and were frequently on the raft itself.

That night Colter swam silently down the river a considerable distance. After landing he traveled on foot all night. Although he was relieved at having escaped with his life, his predicament was still a dreadful one. Lisa's fort was at least seven days' journey away over treacherous land. He did not have a stitch of clothing on his back, no knife, no means of killing animals for food, nothing—but a silent determination to win through.

Seven days later a torn, bleeding man stumbled into the fort at the mouth of the Yellowstone. The trappers did not recognize him at first for his condition was a terrible one. He was nursed back to health, however, and had the pleasure of seeing the astonishment in the faces of his friends as he told them the details of the adventure.

The next year saw Colter returning to the scene of his previous experience for the weighty reason of "recovering his beaver traps." On this excursion he again ran into the Blackfeet Indians but escaped this time with decidedly less difficulty. After long last Colter returned to St. Louis. Evidently he talked a great deal about his adventures, so much it seems that he had himself rated by the general public as an unmitigated prevaricator. However, we know from the map of his route which has been preserved and was later included in the Lewis and Clark map as "Colter's Route in 1807" that his story was all true. It is evident that he ascended the Big Horn River and the Wind River and was the first to explore the valley and these tributaries. He can be credited positively with being the first to discover the sources of the Snake River and possibly also those of the Colorado of the West, the first to see the Teton Mountains, Jackson's Hole, and Pierre's Hole, and most important of all, the first to pass through that remarkable region which was to become known throughout the world as the Yellowstone Wonderland.

BULLETS DON'T NEED NAMES

(Continued from page 45)

Young Jack was reading to her out of a poetry book.

"Look, Miss Sally," he was telling her as I walked in, "here's one about you. Funny thing—it's about you and I must have written it. It's signed Anonymous—

'—of all the girls that are so smart
there's none like pretty Sally.'"

"Am I pretty, Anonymous?" Miss Sally asked.

"Pretty as a red heifer," Jack told her. "Anyway, you'll do until a pretty girl comes along

'—there is no lady in the land
half as sweet as Sally.'"

"Am I sweet, please sir?" she interrupted, but he went right on a reading.

'—you're the darling of my heart,
and you live in our alley.'

And you better get to sleep, you sassy baggage," Jack told her. I tiptoed out of the room and Jack watched her until she fell asleep.

IT WAS a warm evening, for winter, so I sat out on the porch and smoked for a spell and thought things over. All in all, it had been quite a day. Old Jack Hamlin himself couldn't have showed up better than Young Jack had. And Miss Sally had stood up under the shock mighty fine—she was really on the upgrade. All wasn't well with the world, but it was getting quite a lot better!

After a while Young Jack came out and sat by me. "Got a match, Hugh?" was all he said. I gave him a match and we sat there a spell, just smoking and not saying anything. Don't know why, but it was kinda good just sitting there and smoking—kinda like the old days when his daddy was alive.

"God, I hate killing men," he finally said and shuddered like he had a chill. I've seen cold-blooded killers do the same thing after a killing, many a time. "Would you mind getting me a drink, Hugh? There's some brandy in my war bag."

So I went in and lit a candle and rummaged around in his kit until I found the brandy. Right underneath it was a notice like you see tacked up in post offices. It was from the Sheriff's Office in Laramie. I mighty near dropped the brandy when I read it!

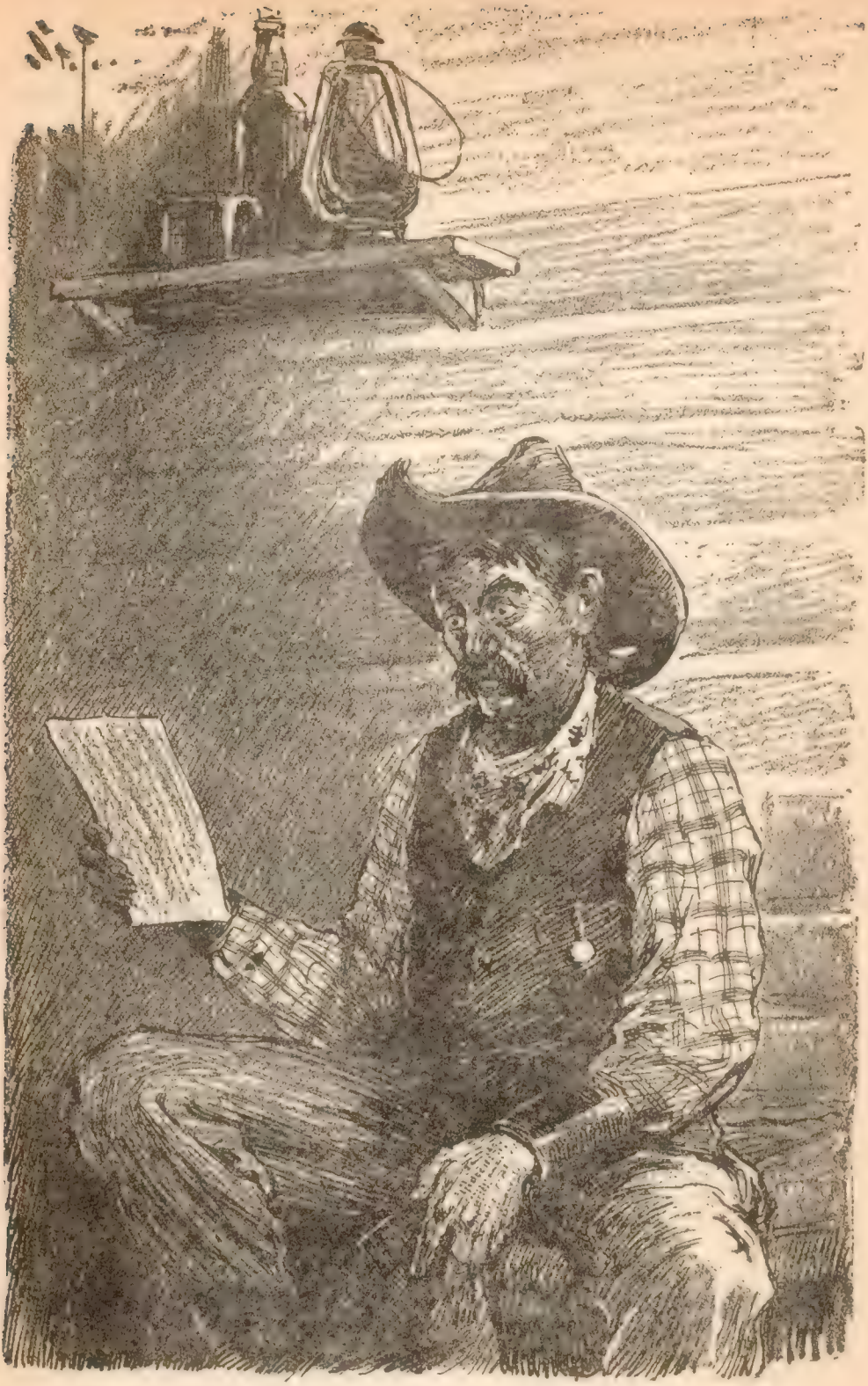
WANTED! DEAD OR ALIVE!

$1,000 reward for the capture of Slick Davis, convicted murderer and forger. Height—five eleven. Weight—180 pounds. Right eyetooth missing. Jagged scar on left cheek. Wears two guns. Dangerous with both, etc. etc.

There was no mistaking the picture on the notice. It was Young Jack Hamlin—right down to the scar and the missing tooth! It was Young Jack—or the man who was posing as Young Jack!

It was a good thing that it was dark on the porch that night. It took every ounce of control I had to keep a poker face and hand him that brandy and say, "Here, son, have a good slug of this and pull yourself together. Think I'll have a couple myself, just to be sociable."

Don't go off half-cocked, I kept telling myself. Don't go jumping at conclusions. Maybe Miss Sally was right—but wait until you're sure. Maybe Jack has been going under that name in Wyoming. Maybe—but how had he got to be a murderer and a forger? Maybe there were two guys identical? What was it all about? I said goodnight to Jack, or whoever he was, and



There was no mistaking the picture on the notice

went to bed—but I couldn't sleep. I tossed around all night—a long night, when even the Old Crow didn't help any!

CHAPTER X

I GOT up next morning feeling ten years older than the dead sea. I saddled me a horse and rode a ways to puzzle things out undisturbed. All I had to go on was a reward notice with a picture on it that looked just like Jack Hamlin—the rest was the workings of my naturally pessimistic mind.

This guy that Miss Sally called Anonymous might be Slick Davis, the Wyoming killer—there were things that pointed that way. If he was, Jack Hamlin must be dead or a prisoner somewheres. If this guy was Slick Davis, somebody must have planned all this—Slick wouldn't just happen along by accident. And yet—whoever this guy was—he hadn't done us any harm —yet. I had the money from Stud Markham in my own account—and he was doing Miss Sally a world of good. More than any of the doctors I hired had done her.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I thought of the advice of some old prophet or philosopher or something—"It is better to do nothing than do the wrong thing." So I decided to let it all rock along for a while and see what happened—and in the meantime learn what I could about what Slick Davis and Young Jack Hamlin had both been doing in the last couple of years.

I rode on back to the house, had breakfast and hit the trail for Silver City and a telegraph office. It was a good six hours' ride and it gave my mind a chance to work on the matter some more.

There was the scar and the missing tooth that Miss Sally had noticed. There was the empty rifle boot to consider. There were the two black-handled forty-fours where Jack had always carried a showy pearl-handled forty-five.

There were the initials "S.D." on his saddle. And the way Frank Reilly's toughs had backed away in the Crystal Palace looked like they might have been afraid of a killer. Hadn't one of them said something about "Slick"? And—to cap it all—Miss Sally said that this Anonymous wasn't her husband.

On the other hand—if you were going to take her judgment that he wasn't her husband, you had to accept her belief that he wasn't going to harm us any.

My mind kept running on and on. How could a stranger know us all so well—this guy knew me, and Shorty and Bert, and Old Hennery, and almost everybody else in the county. How could a stranger know everybody that way? And where did Lefty Allen fit into the deal? Was he a friend of Slick's? And why—if this Slick belonged to the wild bunch—why should they try to bushwhack him?

Six hours of this didn't bring me any nearer the answer than when I started —and by the time I got to Silver City I was so blamed mixed up that I hardly knew my own name. I sent a wire to Sheriff Black in Denver, asking for a report on Young Jack Hamlin's activities while he was there. I sent another wire to Sheriff DeVoto in Laramie, to get the low-down on Slick Davis.

IT WAS then about the middle of the afternoon, and I hadn't slept much the night before, so I went on up to the hotel for a little snooze. I must have slept a couple of hours when voices in the next room woke me up. The partitions were none too thick and I could hear every word that was said as plain as if I had been in the room. There

were a couple of jiggers in there—and they were talking about Slick Davis!

"Reckon he'll come, Glade?" one of them asked.

"He'd better, Otto. He's got some tall explaining to do. The boss sent me down here to straighten him out, and if Slick knows what's good for him he'll be here. I wrote him a couple of days ago to meet me here tonight."

I must have been pretty wore out, for I dozed off again. I knew there was something on my mind about a guy named Slick, and the name Glade sounded familiar, too—but I was just too worn out to give a hang, I reckon. When I woke up sometime later there was a third voice talking awful determined like. It was Jack Hamlin's voice—but they weren't calling him "Jack." They were calling him "Slick"!

"Tell your boss it's all off, Glade," Jack's voice was telling them. "I'm none too finicky—but you didn't tell me she was out of her mind, Glade. You said she was sick and was gonna die soon—but you didn't tell me right, Glade. I've done some pretty-low-down things, Glade—but I won't be a party to robbing a crazy woman. Particularly one as pretty and young as she it."

"I gave you five thousand bucks in advance, Slick. And the boss wants results. He wants 'em pronto!"

"Well, he's not going to get 'em from me. The deal is off. I hate to let you down, but here's one deal that's not going to come off if I can stop it!"

"Fell for the gal, huh?"

"What if I did, Glade?" Jack asked, his voice getting tough. "What's it to you?"

"Now don't get excited, Slick—don't get excited." Glade sounded a little scared. "It ain't me that's telling you what to do. It's the boss. I just work for him."

"That's all right, Glade," Jack's voice said. "No hard feelings between you and me. You're mighty close to the border now—why don't you light out for Mexico and get out of this mess before things start to pop around here?"

"No, Slick, I'll stick to the boss," Glade said. "You'd do well to do the same thing. It ain't like you to take a man's money and then let him down."

"All right, Glade—you gave me five thousand bucks that your boss laid on the line. Tell your boss that it's right here in my money belt. I haven't spent a cent of it. Tell him he can have it any time he comes out to the ranch to get it. Or he can take it off my body when they finally get me—like they tried to do at Signal Rock, yesterday."

"He was right mad when he got Brennand's wire, Slick. He lost his temper and told them to get you right then. But he's thought it over since then and decided to give you another chance. He'll even raise the ante a little, if that's what is bothering you."

"Nope, Glade—that won't get it."

"LOOK, Slick—he's got too much on you. You'll swing if you double-cross the boss. What about Harry Blake, Slick? And where is Jack Hamlin?"

"Any way you work it I'll get shot or hung in the end, anyway—so what's the odds? I'm not going through with this. Tell your boss, whoever he is, that he can go plumb to hell. As long as I can pull a trigger nobody is going to do any harm to Sally Blake!"

"All right, guess your mind is made up," Glade said. "No hard feelings, now—but likely I'll be shooting at you if I ever see you again."

"No hard feelings," Jack told him. "Tell your boss his money is here any time he wants it. So long."

I heard the door slam and boots go clumping down the hall, and this guy

Glade kept saying over and over, "The poor fool, the poor damned fool."

I found myself kinda admiring this Anonymous, this Slick Davis, or Jack Hamlin, or whoever he was. Maybe he was a murderer and a forger and a bad man from away back—but he had sure cut loose from his gang to stick up for Miss Sally. Guess seeing her every day had made me kinda lose sight of how sweet and pretty she was. Guess this Slick maybe fell for her. *Quien sabe?* Everybody has got a good streak in 'em somewheres, I reckon. I was right glad I hadn't gone off half-cocked and run him off the ranch. He was going to be a help, I could see right there. And besides, he was doing Miss Sally a lot of good, which was all I really gave a hang about anyway!

Things were working out. They'd likely keep right on working out whether I worried about them or not—so I decided to go on down stairs and eat a couple of steaks and take eight or nine drinks and maybe get in a poker game and keep my mind off my troubles. It was going to take until morning to get answers to my telegrams so I'd just as well have me a little fling, I thought.

Just thinking about it made me feel better. I enjoyed my steak right well. I had me a few drinks and sat in a little stud game for a while, and finally ended up in the Oriental Bar with a quart of cooking whiskey. I sorta lost count of my right-handed drinking, although I remember that I had nine or ten with my left hand.

The first thing you know I was drunker than seven hundred dollars! Liquor never bothers my mind much. I can see good and talk straight when I've been drinking, and I never get sloppy or forgetful, or go on crying jags. My reflexes just get all shot, that's all. My legs don't work like they should, and my hands shake some.

My mind was clear as a bell that night in the Oriental Bar. I can still remember everything—yet I was practically helpless and couldn't do anything about what happened. A man shouldn't get that drunk, I reckon, unless he's among friends—but things sneak up on you sometimes. At that, I would have done all right if Barney Goodwin hadn't broken out of the penitentiary.

FIVE or six years before we had a little run in with Barney and his bunch. We killed several of them, including Barney's brother Al, and helped Barney get sent to the pen for life. Barney just had to pick the night I was paralyzed drunk to show up in the Oriental with six or eight of his boys. There I was—leaning against the bar—just plain, paralyzed drunk!

"This is gonna be awful easy, Hugh," Barney said. "You'd just as well drop that gun you've got in your hand. You've got the shakes so bad you couldn't hit the ground with your hat. Who'd have ever thought I'd find an old curly wolf like you too drunk to hold a gun?"

I'd got my gun out when I saw him coming in, but shucks—I just couldn't cut it. That gun was as heavy as a ton of bricks. I doubt if I could have thumbed the hammer back.

"Well, get it over with, Barney," I told him, halfway meaning what I said. "Drunk is one of the ways I'd rather die."

"Hugh, you got guts," Barney said. "Have another drink to warm your belly up before I fill it full of lead."

"Don't care if I do," Barney, don't care if I do," I said, pouring me a good stout slug. I started to throw it down, but this Anonymous guy—this Slick or Jack or whoever he was—just popped up out of nowhere and took the drink

out of my hand. He sniffed it, gulped it down and made a gosh-awful face.

"Damn it, Hugh," he said, "a man your age ought to stick to drinking whiskey, or at least cooking whiskey. That's plain fighting whiskey. You ought to show some respect for that aging throat of yours. Phaugh! Grab your ears, gents," he said, wheeling around like a flash, with a gun in both hands and both of 'em pointed right at Barney Goodwin! As one man, Barney and his boys grabbed their ears.

"Seems like you're getting plumb unparticular," Jack said. (I couldn't get used to calling him Slick, so I still thought of him as Jack.) "For a man who is supposed to be old enough to know better, anyways. Drinking rotgut with scum like Barney Goodwin. I'm plumb ashamed of you, Hugh."

"Boss, I think you're right," said Lefty, who had borrowed the bartender's shotgun and was covering the rest of Barney's gang. "I sorta helped myself to the shotgun, boss. Thought we might get some ducks on the river going home—that is if we don't use up all our shells here."

"Save your shells, Lefty," Jack said. "There's only Barney and five, six of these ugly mugs here. I'll spank 'em and send 'em on their way by my lonesome. Why don't you throw old Hugh over your shoulder and tote him up to his boudoir? I'll start Barney on the way to hell or Mexico, or wherever he wants to go."

"Don't shoot, Slick," Barney begged him. "We'll go. We won't cause no trouble. We just stopped in on our way to Mexico. Just to sorta say good bye to old Hugh, there. You just leave us go and we won't bother nobody."

"Ain't we gonna shoot at least one of 'em, boss?" Lefty said. "A man gets all out of practice around here."

"Sooner or later we'll get to do some shooting, Lefty," Jack told him. "We'll find somebody that acts as big as they talk, and then you and me'll whittle 'em down some."

THAT'S all I remember about that night in the Oriental Bar. I came to about nine the next morning in my room at the hotel. There was Lefty sitting in a chair, reading his everlasting Police Gazette. Seeing me awake, he said:

"You know, a man in jail never does get enough magazines to look at. You reckon a guy could stay straight in a new country like this?"

"You might, Lefty," I told him. "You're getting wages for doing it right now."

"That's right, Hugh, I am. There was a time when wages wasn't enough—but right now I'd rather work for Jack Hamlin at forty bucks a month than own my own saloon. That guy is the real McCoy, Hugh!"

"Yea—he's a man, all right. He get hurt any last night?" I asked.

"Hurt? Him? Why, them guys scarcely opened their meat traps. Likely they're across the Rio Grande by now."

"Where is Jack, then, Lefty?" I asked, still kinda thick headed from my drinking.

"He pulled out about midnight, Hugh. Said he'd better get back to the ranch, since you wasn't there to watch things. He gave me a pint for you to sober up on, but I'll swear—I just got to nipping at it. I'll go out and get you another one while you stick your shirttail in and pull on your boots."

So I got up and the pint Lefty brought eased my head some. We had a little breakfast, collected the telegrams that I had originally come to town for, and headed back to the ranch. On the way I read the telegrams.

Sheriff Black wired from Denver—"Jack Hamlin here about two weeks, last September. Seen with Glade Connor and man known as Bluebeard. Bought tickets for Deming. Conductor says left train at Las Vegas. Connor left Denver three days ago."

And from Laramie, Sheriff DeVoto wired—"Slick Davis convicted of forgery. Long string of killings to his credit. Escaped in prison break. Thought to be in New Mexico or Arizona Territories."

Even with the horrible hang-over I had, I could put two and two together. Bluebeard the bartender was mixed up in this somehow. He knew everybody in Grant County—and he could have told Slick all about it. But he'd left the Crystal Palace just before we'd got that wire from Jack, and nobody had heard from him in some weeks. It was as plain as the nose on my face!

If I'd had the sense God gave little apples I would have known that something was up the day Slick kept us from hanging Lefty. That is if he was Slick!

CHAPTER XI

IT DIDN'T occur to me, until we were half way home, that it would have been the day of my funeral if Jack hadn't saved my life the night before. (I'd decided to call him Jack until I proved for sure different.) The liquor had begun to wear off and the truth seeped into my mind, and the first thing you know I began to think that, murderer or no murderer, he was a guy to tie to.

He didn't have to save my life. He took considerable risk to his own in doing it. If it hadn't been for him there would be daisies growing in my face by now—so I decided to sing low for a while and not say anything about all I'd heard the day before. He'd been doing Miss Sally a lot of good, too—so I decided to watch him close and let it go at that. Even if he was Slick Davis I didn't see how he could steal the ranch right from under my nose.

Lefty and I got to the ranch about noon, and routed Old Hennery out to get us something to eat. Nothing like six hours in the saddle to whip up an appetite. Old Hennery was none to enthusiastic about feeding—having just give the boys an early feed at eleven so's they could get back to the branding down on the river.

"Got a few cold beans and biscuits that I can warm over for you," Old Hennery grumbled. "Don't see why you can't get around here at meal times like other people."

So Lefty and I went out and washed up a little and came back to eat. Young Jack came in about the time we were sitting down. Besides the few beans, there were a few steaks, and some fried potatoes on the side and a dozen or so eggs and a couple of dried apple pies.

"Right tasty looking little snack, Hennery," Jack said with a twinkle in his eye. "Mind if I set in on a piece of pie and a cup of coffee?"

"It ain't nothing," Old Hennery said. "You should have seen the grub I used to dish out when I was working for the Bar-X, down on the Pecos. There was so many men to feed we had to go away up the canyon and find a dry basin, so's we'd have a place big enough to mix our biscuits in. Used to barbecue forty-one steers at a time in the pits they had down there. Why, I remember—"

"What were you doing, Hennery?" Lefty interrupted. "Were you the head cook, or just one of the biscuit mixers?"

"I was just a young spriggins, then, son. Sort of a cook's helper, I was."

"That where you learned cooking?"

"Hell, no—I was a teamster," Hennery said.

"Teamster in a cook camp?"

"Yep, Lefty, that's what I said. I was the cook's helper and teamster in the bargain. Drove a six-mule team."

"Hauling in the biscuits, I suppose?" jeered Lefty.

"No, son," Old Hennery said very patient, like he was explaining two and two to a school kid. "I was a specialist in them days. All I did was harness up them six mules and haul eggshells away from the cook camp—nothing more. Kept me busy from sun-up to dark just hauling them eggshells away!"

"That what you make that drinking alcohol of yours out of? Never heard of fermenting eggshells," Lefty said.

"Nope, son—that's a secret formuler, handed down from generation unto generation. You boys finish your eating and clear out of here—I got to get ready to feed them hungry kioties again in an hour or so."

SO WE filled up and eased our belts, and I began to feel right good again. There I was, a reasonably honest man—eating with a guy who was a murderer and a forger and another jasper that was a cowthief and who knows what else. There I was, eating with the pair of them and feeling good about it. Hell, I thought to myself, the three of us together could just about whip the world. Away down inside of me I knew they were my friends—and friendship rubs out a lot of boundaries, sometimes. I knew as well as I knew my own name that Lefty would give his life for Jack, and that Jack would do the same for Miss Sally.

Yes, sir, I felt that the three of us together could clean up the whole blamed county. And we mighty near did before we got through. Jack seemed to sense my thoughts, for he said to me:

"Long about tomorrow or the next day hell is going to pop around here."

"Reckon we better hire a few extra gun hands?" I asked him.

"Nope, Hugh, I don't think we're going to need 'em. We got Lefty and you and me. And Lefty is good as two or three, the way he's yearning to do a little shooting."

"That's right, boss," Lefty said. "I'm getting way behind in my shooting since I come to this place. Looks like I'll have to work overtime, once we get started!"

"What are you expecting to happen, son?" I asked him.

"Hasn't it struck you kinda funny that right after we refused to sell out to old Judge Brennand, that things have happened right fast? Brennand wires Denver, I get bushwhacked, and the next day Barney Goodwin cuts loose on you."

"Yea, Jack," I said, agreeing with him. "It kinda looks like somebody was mad at us. You reckon there's any connection between them happenings?" I asked, not letting on what I heard in the hotel.

"Well, there could be," Jack said. "If you and I were both dead, it wouldn't be hard for somebody to get a guardian appointed for Miss Sally. And this here guardian could sell out a few million dollars' worth of goldmine, or whatever they're after, for two cents on the dollar."

I DIDN'T ask him where this "gold or whatever they're after" was, or who "they" were that wanted it so bad, or how he knew all about it. I decided that it was just a waste of time for me to do any more thinking—just let nature take its course, and hope for the best.

"What do you reckon they are going to do next?" I asked.

"They couldn't get you in the Ori-

ental Bar. They didn't have any luck bushwhacking me. We don't go to town much, so they'll quit trying there. What they're going to do is sneak up on the house one of these nights and pick us off through the windows. Maybe when we're eating, or even after we've gone to bed—when we least suspect it."

"What we gonna do about it, boss?" Lefty asked.

"Damned if I know, Lefty. Better have lots of guns around handy. Better stay away from the windows. Better post a look-out on the roof," Jack told him.

"Night shooting is kinda hard," Lefty said. "A fellow can't see none too good in the dark. We better get us a big pile of hay handy somewheres, so we can have us a bonfire. Takes a little light for good shooting."

So we got forted up, loaded a lot of extra guns and stacked 'em around handy. Lefty fixed him three or four piles of hay near the outbuildings and the house. Jack and Lefty took turns watching from the roof. It was a long, nerve-racking night, but nothing happened.

Next morning we felt kinda sheepish, like kids that aren't scared of ghosts, running past the graveyard. We waited until the boys had eaten before we went down to breakfast. After breakfast Lefty took a rifle and went back on the roof—and Jack and I spent the morning studying the encyclopedia, trying to learn where to find gold.

"Never heard of going prospecting with a book, Hugh," Jack said, his eyes twinkling like he was having a lot of fun with his troubles. "Maybe we can sorta find out what gold looks like and where it lives when it's at home."

"Never saw much gold in the raw, son," I told him. "Got nine or ten teeth plugged with it, but shucks—I don't know for sure it's gold. Just got old Doc McClary's word for it."

"Gosh, Hugh, you're younger than I thought. A man with nine or ten teeth left is just in his prime."

We got a few ideas on where gold is found and kinda surveyed the ranch in our minds to see where places like the book said were. We finally decided to ride up into the rough country east of Signal Rock after dinner, to see what we could see. There were a lot of quartz veins and all up that way, and the encyclopedia allowed that was a good place to look for gold.

SO AFTER dinner we saddled up and took Miss Sally and rode on out—Lefty riding ahead a piece just in case there was any trouble on the loose that way. A good hand, that Lefty. Never saw a man so cool and careless about his own life when he was looking out for his friends. Guess he would have done almost anything for Young Jack—yet he'd hardly known him more than a couple of weeks. A quick thinker, too. Twice already Lefty had been in a tight spot with Jack and had done the right things both times, without being told. Yes, sir, a good man to have around in a pinch.

We scouted east of Signal Rock quite a bit and couldn't find a thing that looked a bit like gold, or gold-bearing quartz, or anything of the sort. We were about to call it a day, when Miss Sally pointed out the prospect holes to us!

"Look, Anonymous," Miss Sally said, pointing to a hole pretty well hid behind some rocks. "Looks like a bear has been digging in for the winter."

"Miss Sally, you're the best prospector of us all," Jack said, excited as an old maid with a man coming up the walk. "Ten to one that's what we're looking for!"

It was—and it wasn't! Lefty got a chunk of pitch pine out of an old dead stump and made a torch, and he and Jack crawled into that hole. Miss Sally and I waited, and finally they came out, empty handed.

"Where's the gold, son?" I asked.

"Hugh," Jack said, "we're suckers. Just a couple of suckers. We looked up gold in our encyclopedia—just wasted our time, that's all!"

"You don't tell me?" I said, knowing I was walking into something.

"Yea—we should have read up on coal, Hugh! That hole goes down to the nicest vein of the blackest coal you ever saw! Bet this whole blamed mountain is made out of coal. Come on, throw that old weatherbeaten carcass of yours in the saddle and let's ride around a little and see how many more of these holes we can find."

So we skirted the base of the cliffs east of Signal Rock and found about fifteen more test holes—and they all lead to coal! I'll bet there was enough coal in that vein to start a first-class hell right here in New Mexico.

Everybody was as excited as all get-out. Here was part of the mystery solved. Here was a lot of stuff that could be turned into a lot of money. Yes, sir, we got right worked up that afternoon.

Aside from finding the coal, Miss Sally was having a real nice time. While Young Jack and I were talking coal and how to sell it, she and Lefty paired off and talked about first one thing and then another. She was having a big time hurrahing him, and finally she started in on us.

"You know, Lefty," she said, "men are the stupidest people about plain, ordinary, everyday things. Of course, they are great thinkers and politicians and all that—but they can't see a lot of little things right under their noses."

"Ma'am," Lefty answered, not at all embarrassed by her talking to him so much, "when they're off by themselves or herding with other men, they're right reasonable critters. They can tell what time it is, and count to four without working up a sweat. It's only when they get around disturbing elements, such as you, ma'am, that they get a little bit fractious."

"Well, thank you, Lefty," Miss Sally said. "I'll bet a cooky that's a compliment of some kind. You take Uncle Hugh, now—and Anonymous, too—they both think you are left handed."

"Ain't I, ma'am?" Lefty asked, grinning from ear to ear.

"You might be, Lefty," Miss Sally answered. "You wear your gun on your left side, and your name is Lefty—but when you're reading a magazine, you turn your pages with your right thumb. And, just a little while ago, when you rode up that draw ahead of us, you stuck your right hand in your shirt where that button is missing. I'll bet you're just a great big fraud, Lefty Allen. I'll bet a cooky you've got another gun inside your shirt."

"Ma'am," Lefty said, "you are positivulee clairvoyant, whatever that means. Can you read tea leaves, too?"

"No, Lefty, I'm just a poor dumb woman whose place is in the home."

When we got in that night I sent Roots into Silver City to see his waitress and send a wire to a coal man I knew up at Cerrillos, telling him to hightail it down here and look the situation over for us. Then I had supper with the boys, worked on the books a while, and started up to the house to tell Miss Sally good-night.

Lefty whispered down from the roof, "There's five or six guys just sneaked in and holed up by the blacksmith shop. Tell Jack. I'm going out and light my bonfires."

CHAPTER XII

I'LL admit it was kinda boogery—knowing that there were half a dozen men out there in the dark waiting for us to get in the light so they could take a few pot-shots at us. Men that could see every move we made!

"What's the matter, Uncle Hugh?" Miss Sally asked, sensing that something was wrong.

"Nothing, child, nothing" I told her. "Just a couple fellows come in to see Jack and me."

"Yea—just a few old friends dropped in to say Howdy," Jack told her. "If you'll excuse us, we'll be back in a minute, querida."

"What did you say?" she asked, looking startled, like maybe she'd seen a ghost.

"I said, 'Compose that pretty face of yours, and we'll be back in a minute, querida,' " Jack answered.

Whang—the party opened with a rifle shot through the window that broke a glass not six inches from Miss Sally's hand. She fainted dead away, again. Good thing, I reckon—it got her down out of the line of fire.

"Why, the lousy sons!" Jack said, madder than seven hundred dollars. "Anybody that would shoot that close to a woman ain't fit to live. Keep her under cover, will you, Hugh? Lefty and I'll tend to this—and tend to it quick!"

He'd forgot caution, he'd forgot fear. He'd forgot his plain, ordinary horse sense! Young Jack just stomped out of there with a gun in each hand and blood in his eye! He made a bee-line for the blacksmith shop with both guns blazing. Lefty had lit his bonfires and sneaked back to the roof while they were flaring up!

"Give 'em hell, boss," Lefty yelled, and covered Jack from the roof with his rifle. His bonfires were burning bright and you could see those five gunslingers plain as day.

It was like watching ducks go down at a shooting gallery. Young Jack wasn't missing that night! He picked off one man at the end of the patio and another at the blacksmith shop—and Lefty got one with his rifle as they made for their horses.

"Better cool off a little, before you bust a gut," Lefty told Jack. "You can't catch up with those guys on foot. Anyway, I'm the one that ought to go after 'em—you're one up on me. You got two and I only got one."

"Guess you're right, Lefty," Jack answered, wiping the blood from his face where it was running from a crease in the side of his head. "Better get those jaspers stored in the tool shed until we can get the coroner out to look 'em over. We've been giving him quite a lot of business lately, at that."

"We ought to get a little cut from him," Lefty said. "Ought to be able to make a little tobacco money that way."

Young Jack Hamlin wasn't a pretty sight. He was bleeding right bad from the wound in his head, and the blood had run all over his shirt. He shouldn't have gone in the house and let Miss Sally see him that way—but he did—and the lid blew off of hell!

SHE was sitting up on the couch when we went back in the house. She was wild-eyed—mad as a March hare. She screamed, "You killer! You killer! Get him out of here, Uncle Hugh! Get him out of here! Make him get out, Uncle Hugh, make him get out."

"You better go, son," I said as kindly as I could and he went out. I called Maria and got Miss Sally some of the medicine the doctor had left for times like those. After a long time we got her to sleep.

It was one wild night, gentlemen. Three men killed, Miss Sally out of her mind again and down on Young Jack, or Slick, or whoever the man was who had been doing her so much good. I'd have given my right arm if I could have turned time back just one day and got her out of the country before it all happened.

She was stark raving mad for two days after that. Jack tried to calm her, tried to soothe her—but he just made her worse. She'd rave and throw things at him, and call him "murderer" over and over again. Finally I had to run him out and tell him to stay out until I sent for him. He went, meek as a lamb.

I felt kinda sorry for him. Maybe he was Slick Davis, *quien sabe?* Maybe he was a murderer—I didn't know for sure—but whoever he was, he had done her a lot of good in the last couple of weeks. Murderer or not, he'd risked his life plenty to protect her property for her.

He took his war bag and moved into the spare room down at the foreman's house. He and Lefty split up the nights, taking turns watching for another attack, but none came. Reckon they must have got a bellyful the first time!

"What do you suppose will happen next, Jack?" I asked one night after supper when we were kinda talking things over.

"Remember what I told you, the night I cleaned Monty Montgomery, riding home?"

"Nope, I plumb forgot, son," I answered him, "so blamed many things have happened since then."

"You said that if I could just get the law down on me, on top of all the other guys gunning for me, that I would be in the soup for sure."

"How they going to get the law down on you?" I asked, innocent as pie. Here it comes, I thought.

"Hugh," he said and laughed like all get-out, "you just wait and see, you nosey old woman. I'm just as curious as you are. But the law is all they got left. They're going to give up trying to kill me outright—they're going to let the law do it. When they do—don't let Lefty go off half-cocked. Promise me."

"All right, Jack, I'll do what I can. He's a pretty good man to have around. I'll try and keep him straightened out and out of trouble. It's hard to stop a buzz-saw, though."

MISS SALLY recovered some the third day after the fight. She was still kinda peaked and washed-out, but she was calm and almost sane again, except for the look in her eyes. A scared look—like I've seen in the eyes of men just before they got hung!

"Have I been giving you much trouble, Uncle Hugh?" she asked me, ashamed as all get-out.

"No, honey," I told her, "you've just been a little upset on account of the shooting and all, I reckon. But it's all over now and it won't happen again, ever."

"Where is Anonymous, Uncle Hugh?" she wanted to know.

"He moved down to the foreman's house with me."

"You won't let him come back up here any more, will you, Uncle Hugh?" she asked, with that scared look still in her eyes.

"No, child," I soothed her, "we won't let him back in the house any more. You just sit tight and forget it and we'll keep him out of your sight."

"That's fine, Uncle Hugh, that's fine," she said, looking a little relieved. "I was wrong about him, Uncle Hugh—dreadfully wrong. Don't trust him, Uncle Hugh—don't trust him any farther than

you can watch him. He isn't what he pretends to be, at all. I know now!"

"I'm watching him, honey," I told her. "Don't you fret. We aren't going to let anything more happen to you. You just be easy now and leave it to your Uncle Hugh."

What a pretty kettle of fish this was getting to be. Miss Sally was supposed to be half crazy—yet she'd noticed things about this so-called Jack Hamlin when he first came back that I'd missed. She'd spotted those prospect holes for us. And now she was telling me that this so-called Jack Hamlin was plumb bad—that he wasn't what he pretended to be at all. She was telling me not to trust the man I was beginning to lean on—and, the way things had been, her judgment had proved better than mine!

I sat down in my room and started to comb through all the things that had happened—to see what she had seen that I had missed. I hadn't figured it out, even days later, when the sheriff showed up and answered the question for me.

If this guy wasn't Jack Hamlin, which I still wasn't sure about—he couldn't be anybody but Slick Davis. He looked like Jack, he knew a lot that Jack knew—but there it stopped. He shot better than Jack ever could, he had more foresight than Jack ever had. He was wiser, and harder—and yet he was softer and more considerate of other people than Jack had ever been.

Miss Sally said when she first saw him that he wasn't Jack Hamlin. Glade Connor had called him "Slick." So had one of Frank Reilly's gun-men, and Barney Goodwin, too! All right—he was Slick Davis—so what? He hadn't done us any harm—yet. He fought for Miss Sally's ranch. He'd saved my life at the risk of his own. He'd stopped the rustling and showed me how to market our stock and save a loss next year.

And he hadn't got a single thing out of it besides his food and lodging. He hadn't cashed any checks. He hadn't forged his name to any deeds.

I FINALLY decided that Miss Sally was just a little more off her rocker than usual, and was imagining things. I decided to let things ride along until something else happened to bring them to a head.

What I needed was a good drink and some sleep. The world couldn't end much before morning, anyway. Just as well get in a good night's sleep, I thought, and poured me four or five fingers of rye in a water glass. I was fixing to gulp it down when Jack walked in.

"You might ask a man to join you, Hugh," he said. "Only drunkards and old, broken-down foremen drink by themselves."

"Young fellow," I told him, "I'm both of those things, and I'll drink by myself if I please. But since you're here, you good-for-nothing son, have a slug with me." And I poured him out one.

"Here's regards, Jack, or Slick, or whoever the hell you are," I said.

"Down the hatch, old timer!" he said, and we gulped. It tasted pretty good, so we had two or three more and the situation eased up a mite.

"I reckon I shouldn't have left that reward notice around, should I, Hugh?"

"Reckon not," I said. "Who are you, anyway, son?"

"What difference does it make who I am, Hugh?" he came back at me.

"Well, since you ask me, I can't see that it makes any difference." And it didn't. Whoever he was wouldn't change things now. The deck was already stacked.

"Then what are you bellyaching about? Suppose I'm Jesse James—I'm

helping you keep your ranch from the wolves, ain't I? Supposing I'm Billy the Kid come to life again, what difference does it make?"

"None, I reckon," I told him. "None at all. You haven't done half bad by us."

"Well, all right—forget it then. Quit worrying over what hasn't happened yet. Maybe it won't happen. Either you can trust me or not. I'm risking my life every minute I hang around here. If I got to tell you my whole life history and have my palm read just to risk a bullet in the back—why, to hell with you. Even if I did tell you the truth you'd think you were smarter than I am and you wouldn't believe me anyway. You do go digging up some crazy ideas out of that fossilized old brain of yours."

"All right, son, let up: Uncle, Indian, anything you want me to say—I give up," I said, too blamed confused to talk any more or care what happened.

I HAD me another drink and thought a spell, and it came to me that what happened to me, or who he was didn't amount to shucks—it was what became of Miss Sally that was important, and that I needed this guy for the time to help protect her and her interests. So I decided I'd better get along with him as best I could.

"Excuse an old man's bad temper, son," I said to him. "Just tell me what you want me to know, and let the rest ride. The important thing is Miss Sally."

"Now you're talking sense," he said. "It doesn't matter who I am. If I was the Count of Monte Cristo there would still be somebody trying to steal this ranch from Miss Sally. I don't know who it is—but they cooked it all up with Glade Connor. Glade either doesn't know who it is or won't tell. But Glade got a lot of money down and gets a lot more when a deed to the ranch is signed."

"Maybe we better shoot this Glade and get him out of the way."

"No, that wouldn't help any. They'd just dig up some other jigger to take his place. They'd just get 'em some more killers and we'd start over. Since Slick Davis isn't going to forge Jack Hamlin's name to a deed, they've got to get him out of the way. They can't seem to kill him, so they'll get the law on him—and maybe then you'll find out who they are. Likely you'll have to, Hugh—I'll be in the hoosegaw, waiting to be hung, no doubt."

"Who do you reckon is back of all this, Jack," I asked, still calling him Jack from force of habit.

"It's somebody in Silver City, Hugh. Somebody with money and influence. Somebody that knows the country. Somebody that's been here long enough to know how to pull the strings without being seen himself. That's why I thought it might very well be Monty or Frank."

"What are we going to do about it, Jack?" I asked.

"Nothing sudden, Hugh. Just lay low and keep our powder dry. They're bound to make a mistake sooner or later. I figured Monty's poker-playing out all right, didn't I?"

"Yea, you did, son."

"Well, let's just keep our pants on. One little mistake on their part will maybe fit the whole puzzle together for us."

And it did—sooner than we expected—in a place we had never expected. At least I hadn't. When I look back on it now, I think maybe this so-called Jack Hamlin must have planned it that way, knowing it would save Miss Sally's ranch for her, even if it did put a noose around his own neck!

CHAPTER XIII

OLD Hennery was crying over some onions he was cutting up for a stew when I got down for a late breakfast the next morning. The boys were all through and gone, so I sat there by myself and watched Old Hennery weep. Young Jack and Lefty rode up about the time I was through, armed to the teeth—looking bleary eyed and sleepy, like they'd been riding all night.

"You boys aiming to start a war?" Hennery asked, eying the extra artillery they were packing.

"Well, it's like this, Hennery," Lefty said, easing himself into a chair, "it's got to where those cockroaches down to the bunkhouse walk off with everything that's loose. Took me forty minutes to find my boots, day before yesterday. I've worked on many a range and slept in many a jail house, but never did I see cockroaches with such taking ways before."

"Shucks, they ain't nothing to the roaches we used to have down on the Pecos," Hennery said, wiping the tears out of his eyes. Serious as things were I couldn't help laughing at Old Hennery, crying his eyes out and getting ready to lie his head off. "They run so big down there that they got to mixing with the trade rats. It wasn't nothing to see a trade rat with long feelers and a hard-shelled back. It sure puzzled the old tom-cat we had."

"You don't say," Lefty said, pretending to believe every word of it. "What was the old cat so puzzled about? Couldn't he bust the hard shells and eat the rats or roaches or whatever they was?"

"Yea, Lefty, I guess he could of, if he wanted to—but this old tom-cat was too dad-burned lazy to kill him a pack-roach to eat, and anyway the flavor wasn't as good as the plain rats had been. This old tom had got to where he'd just steal him a nice piece of cheese out of the kitchen and leave it lay around where these trade-roaches could find it. They'd cart the cheese off and bring him back a nice piece of meat or a young chicken or something tasty."

"Hell," said Lefty, "I don't see nothing puzzling to that. Looks like the tom-cat had a cinch of it."

"He did for a while, Lefty—but as time went on those trade-roaches got smarter and smarter. One day when the old tom-cat put out his usual piece of cheese the trade-roaches played a little joke on him. They went down to the pantry and got 'em a can of milk and traded it for that cheese. That old tom-cat like to went crazy trying to get that can open. Got so blamed mad he up and killed every last trade-roach on the place."

"You don't tell," Lefty marveled. "Seems like he'd have left a couple go for seed, now wouldn't you?"

"Lefty," Young Jack horned in, "you can't expect a tom-cat to make any provision for the future. It ain't their nature. Match you to see who sleeps first." They matched and Lefty won and headed for the bunkhouse and turned in.

"You wouldn't have a pair of field glasses handy, would you, Hugh?" Jack asked me, making me wonder if maybe he wasn't Slick, after all. He would have remembered those Swiss glasses he brought me, you'd think!

"Yea, Jack—take those you brought me from the coast. They're up in my room," I told him and he looked at me like he didn't know what I meant. "What you aiming to do with field glasses?"

"I'm going to sit up on the roof for a spell, and see what I can see. Too bad we haven't got some near neighbors—I

could peek in their windows and see if they are living right," Jack said, and climbed up on the roof where he could see the country for five or six miles around with those powerful glasses. Nobody was going to sneak up on us in broad daylight. No, sir.

THEY tell me that a condemned man gets to where he wishes hanging day would roll around and they'd get it over with. I reckon those last few days had been that way with this so-called Jack Hamlin. The trap was closing in on him, and you could see it wearing him down a little. Oh, he wasn't scared, or anything like that. He still had that easy-going way about him. He still laughed and joked and made light of things—but you could see him tightening up, too. He didn't miss a thing. Nothing moved on the place that he didn't see. He was all serious business, that morning on the roof—and that business was keeping the ranch house guarded against any more surprise attacks. He was tense as a buggy spring, and I don't believe he ever would have slept if Lefty hadn't turned out around noon and made him sleep!

"Listen here, boss," Lefty laid down the law to him, "you're a good man. You can whip your weight in wildcats and you can go nine years without a drink of water—but you're not Napoleon or Atlas or any of them jiggers. You gotta have some sleep, see? I'm a good hand myself, but when hell does start to pop around here I can't handle it by my lonesome. And an old worn-out scarecrow, like you're gonna be pretty soon, ain't going to be much help. It's high noon and I can see for nigh on to nine miles with those field glasses you got—so you climb into bed. Ain't nobody going to sneak up on us while I'm watching."

So Young Jack slept all afternoon while Lefty took his turn watching from the roof with his Police Gazette and my field glasses. Funny thing, I thought, Jack forgetting that he'd brought 'em to me from San Francisco. Come night time, Lefty and Jack took their horses and some extra blankets and rode to where the road from Silver City narrowed down through Box Canyon. Guess they took turns watching all night there, too. At daylight they rode back in, and Lefty took up his watch from the roof again.

Along about the third day of this, Lefty was up on the roof taking his turn. He yelled for me and woke Jack up a-doing it.

"Must be fifteen or twenty of them coming, boss," he said, when Jack got his boots on and showed up. "Looks like we might get to do a little shooting today. Haven't got to shuck a gun in two, three weeks now. Getting all out of practice."

Lefty started bringing up extra rifles and loading them like he was getting set for a siege. Jack looked at him, shaking his head, like he couldn't believe it.

"You really think we could fiight off fifteen or twenty of them, Lefty?" he asked.

"We can sure try, boss."

"Better cut and run, Lefty," Jack told him, "there's no use of you getting strung up just because I do."

"Reckon I'll hang around, boss," Lefty said. "Bet you four-bits I get one before you do."

"Lefty, you're a great guy," Jack told him. "If I owned a saloon I'd give it to you rather than tell you what I got to tell you. I hate to spoil your fun, Lefty—but there isn't going to be any shooting done today. Guys that move as slow and steady and out in the open as those jaspers down there are moving aren't up to anything underhanded. That's the law moving in on us, Lefty."

"You been breaking any laws around here, boss?" Lefty asked him.

"None that I know of in this neck of the woods, Lefty," Jack surprised me by saying. "Not lately, anyways."

"Me neither, boss. Far as this country's concerned I am a teetotaler when it comes to breaking laws."

"LOOK, you two," I told them both, "we've got plenty of good, fast horses. You've got anyways an hour's start on the law. Take you a couple of extra horses for a change off and you can be over the Arizona border long before they can catch up with you."

"Nope, Hugh," this so-called Jack Hamlin said, "I've quit running from things. Besides, my curiosity has got the best of me. I want to know what they're going to pinch me for!"

"There is such a thing as extradition," I told him.

"Shucks, Hugh—whoever heard of extradition from a Territory? It would mighty near need an act of God to do that. Nope, they've got something they're going to pin on me, all right. Anyways, they've got a nice comfortable jail down in Silver City. Be a warm place to spend the winter. The walls are thick and the windows high—they can't very well bushwhack me if I'm in jail. And they'll quit trying to steal your ranch until after they hang me. That'll be a couple or three weeks, anyways. Give you lots of time to get rid of your stock and sell your coal lands. And you and Lefty can always come down and bust me out of jail. That is," he looked at me kinda queer like, studying me over, "that is, if you still feel like it by then!"

"Always did want to saw bars from the outside of a jail for a change," Lefty said. "Can't see that it would make a lot of difference, but I'd like to try it once to see how it felt."

"If I got to be hung, I want to be hung legal," Jack said, unbuckling his money belt and handing it to me. "You take what money I've got, Hugh, and get me the best lawyer you can find. I want to be sure I'm guilty. You might even hang around town a little and discourage any lynching ideas that might crop up."

"All right, son," I told him. "I'll see that you get a square deal. Still don't see why you don't climb on a horse and light out. Save yourself a lot of trouble."

"I could have done that a long time back, if I'd wanted to dodge trouble—but, somehow or other, I hate to see anything put over on Miss Sally. As long as I'm around, nothing is going to happen to her. This is the best way, Hugh—so quit your bellyaching and get busy and get that coal sold."

"I got a man coming down from Cerrillos any day now," I told him. "Have it all signed, sealed and sold in a week or ten days."

"That's fine. How about a game of seven-up while we are waiting, Lefty?" Jack asked.

"Sounds all right, boss," Lefty answered. "Two-bits a game suit you?"

"That's just what I like to lose a game," Jack said and they sat down and played high-low-jack-and-the-game as unconcerned as two cowhands waiting for a train to come in. You wouldn't think they had a care in the world. They were still playing when Sheriff Banks rode up with his posse.

THE Sheriff wasn't taking any chances. He'd brought with him nearly twenty men to take one. He left a couple at the back of the house, a couple at the gate to cut off any escape and then rode up to where we were and told us to put our guns down and our hands up. Which we did. Nobody was

shocked more than I was when the Sheriff told this so-called Jack Hamlin what he was being arrested for.

"Slick Davis," Banks said, "I hereby arrest you for the murder of Harry Blake, and warn you that anything you say may be used against you."

You could have knocked me over with a feather. I was plain stunned! There it was—the piece that put the whole puzzle together. A three-ear-old should have figured it out. Slick Davis had killed Harry Blake. There really were two of them, and they looked just alike.

I could have kicked myself end over appetite right there, for letting myself be taken in by this smooth-talking gunslinger. With all his stories of gangs and plots and all! Just a plain, out-and-out crook feathering his own nest, that's the way it looked to me.

"So Jack didn't do it," I said. "I should have known."

"Nope, Jack didn't do it, Hugh," this guy I thought was Jack said. "Well, you've got me, Sheriff. So long, Hugh. "Give Lefty six-bits for me, will you—he's three games up on me."

Without another word, without looking back, he got on the horse the Sheriff brought for him and they rode away.

"Good bye, Miss Sally," he yelled at a window as they went past the house.

"Good bye, you murderer," Miss Sally screamed back at him. "So they got on to you at last? Ha, ha, ha—it's funny!" and she went into hysterics and was out of her mind for two days.

The funniest thing about it all was that I'd promised to get him the best lawyer in the country—him that should be hung higher than a kite. He had outguessed me again!

THE grapevine took the news around the county in no time at all. Slick Davis, the Wyoming killer, jailed for the murder of Harry Blake! Slick Davis, the Wyoming forger—trying to steal Jack Hamlin's ranch from his poor little wife! Slick Davis, the Wyoming Bad Man—perfect double for Jack Hamlin, fooling the whole blamed county.

Of course, everybody remembered that they had thought there was something fishy about it all. Everybody knew, all along, that it wasn't Jack Hamlin. You know how folks are. The very men that had been the first to shake his hand and say, "Howdy, Jack, glad to see you back, boy," were the first ones to say they had suspected it all along. They were the first to say that somebody ought to get up a necktie party one of these nights. Ought to lynch that other outlaw, Lefty, too. Likely they'd been in cahoots up there in Wyoming.

Yes, sir, the news got around like wildfire. We had visitors in strings. Old Hennery got plumb tired of feeding them, and I got plumb tired of answering their questions, or trying to answer them. Particularly the one I couldn't answer.

"If that's Slick Davis in jail, not Jack Hamlin—then where is Jack Hamlin?" Was he dead? Was he in trouble somewheres? Or was he just off helling around? I would have given my right eye to know the answer. If he was alive I wanted to go to him and say, "Forgive me, son. I should have known it all along." But I didn't know where he was, and Slick pretended he didn't.

Yes, sir, I was a mixed up old man the day they came and took Slick Davis away to jail. I "didn't know from nothing" as Old Hennery would have put it. I'd been just as sure as anybody that Jack Hamlin had killed Harry Blake. I would have sworn to

it in court, I was that sure. And I had thrown him down flat, not believing a word he'd said. I'd done my part in hounding him out of the country. I felt lower than a snake's belly when I talked to Art Norcop and found out they had the deadwood on this Slick Davis.

Norcop said, "Slick Davis has been a notorious gunman in Wyoming for years, Hugh. He and Jack Hamlin couldn't possibly be the same man, for Slick was at his killing long before Jack Hamlin ever left this country. So there must be two of them that look exactly alike. It has been known to happen before. We've got a good iron-clad case against Slick. He's going to hang higher than a kite. You know what that fellow was up to, Hugh?"

"I've a hazy idea," I told him. "Going to rob Miss Sally, one way or another, I guess."

"I'm not supposed to let this out before the trial—but Slick Davis was going to hang around here until you all got used to him as Jack Hamlin. Then one day he was going to up and sell off all your stock and forge Jack's signature to a deed to the ranch and sell it, too. Then he was going to clean out the bank account and hightail it. Nice guy, this Slick Davis."

"Yeah," I said. "He's a nice guy, all right." Hell, he'd already got me to sell the stock. Guess they nabbed him just in time. And here I was under obligation to him. Why couldn't I have stayed sober that night in the Oriental and killed my own snakes?

I AM a man of my word. Anybody around here will tell you that. I'd made two promises to Slick and I had to keep them both, whether I wanted to or not. So I kept Lefty on at the ranch —and I sent to Denver and hired the best lawyer money could get. I wanted to see Slick Davis hung higher than a kite, all right—but I wanted it done fair and square. If there were any loopholes in the law that would let him out I wanted him to have a lawyer that would find them.

Guess I wanted a clear conscience. Funny how important a clear conscience gets to you when you are getting along in years. There was a time—

Lefty was the only man on the ranch who stood up for Slick Davis after he was arrested. Lefty was ready to go to bat for him any time. "That guy may be an outlaw, but he ain't no murderer," Lefty said. "He wouldn't shoot nobody that didn't have his gun out. I've seen 'em all and I know a square shooter when I see one. There's something funny about this, Hugh. If it's all the same to you I'll kinda hang around and see what I can do."

"Forget it, Lefty," I told him. "You just sit tight and mind your own business and you've got a job for as long as you want it. Slick is going to have a good lawyer and get a fair trial—I told him I'd do that for him and I will. But I don't want to hear any more about the dirty son right now!"

That ended the matter, I thought! I would get Slick a good lawyer and then wash my hands of him. He could go to hell for all of me, after that. But a couple days later, when Jerry Jackson came down from Cerrillos and looked over the coal land around Signal Rock, I began to wonder if Slick was as big a liar as I'd begun to believe he was. It sure looked like he'd been right about the coal. Maybe the other stuff he'd been telling me was true, too. *Quien sabe?*

Jerry Jackson spent three or four days up in the hills, pottering around, surveying, examining those prospect holes and all. "Why, damn it, man," he told me when he had finished,

"you've got enough coal up there to last the railroad the next fifty years."

"What's it worth, Jerry?" I asked him, hardly believing it.

"Hard to say, Hugh. Anywheres from a hundred thousand to a million dollars. Couldn't tell exactly until I get some accurate measurements on it—but it's worth plenty!"

"What can I do with it, Jerry?"

"Tell you what, Hugh," he said, "you give me an agreement to sell to me, if you sell at all—and I'll go up and have a talk with some of the big-wigs in the railroad. We'll have a little pow-wow and I'll come back in a week or so with a proposition."

So I gave Jerry his agreement and he went back to Cerrillos to see what he could do for us. Maybe, I thought, I can sell out for enough to quit the country. Maybe Miss Sally would get better away from it all.

LEFTY came in that night while we were eating supper. "I'm taking my horse," he said, "and the one Jack rode the day you guys were stringing me up. They don't neither one belong to the Jack-in-the-Box, so don't go turning me in for horse stealing."

"That's all right, Lefty, help yourself. You leaving the country?"

"Yea, I am, Hugh. Guess I'll be lighting out. Don't want to work for no lily-livered outfit like this. I'd rather ride the back trails with my own kind than work for wages with a bunch of galoots that'll let a good man hang."

"Need any money, Lefty?"

"None that I could get around here, Hugh. I've got a little. It don't take much where we'll be going," Lefty said.

"What do you mean—we?" I asked.

"Hell—he saved my life, didn't he? Even if he hadn't saved it, he's a man to tie to. I'm going down and snake him out of that two-bit jail. If any of you lily-livered sons want to come along I could use a man to hold the horses." Lefty said this and went on out, not thinking anybody would go with him. But somebody did!

"Hey, wait, Lefty!" I yelled after him. "I'll go with you." He'd saved my life, too—this Slick Davis—without a thought of laws or things out of the past. He'd filled his hands and asked no questions that night I had my back to the wall! "Wait, Lefty—I'll side you!"

So Lefty and I set out about sundown and got into Silver City around midnight. Lefty was a caution—sneaking up on the jail house. Not even a dog barked at him he was so quiet. I held the horses and lived about five hundred years the three minutes he was gone trying to get Slick out. Lefty came back by himself.

"The damned fool don't want out," Lefty whispered, plumb disgusted. "Says he likes it in there. Says he's training some cockroaches to race, and don't want to go away and leave 'em half broke! You go up and reason with him, Hugh."

SO I bellied up to the jail and got up on a beer barrel so I could talk through the bars to Slick.

"Hello, Hugh, you old has-been. What do you want at this time of night? Can't a man sleep in peace, even in a jail?"

"We come to get you out, son," I said. "From what Lefty has heard, and from what Norcop has told me, they got you out on a dead limb. You're sure to hang."

"Maybe I'm out on a limb, Hugh—but I'm not hung yet. Not by a long shot. And I don't want out of jail—so go home and let me sleep. That's what I came to jail for, Hugh—had to catch up on my rest a little."

"Yea, you told me that—but a man don't always believe what he gets told. I've been told you killed Harry Blake—damn your eyes—but Lefty he don't believe it!"

"So that's the way the wind blows?" Slick said and looked kinda down in the mouth for a spell. "Good old Lefty—he's one in a million! Look, Hugh—I never, in all my life, shot a man that wasn't gunning for me or getting ready to! I've never bushwhacked anybody!"

"I wish I could believe that," I told him. "You're a mighty good man in some ways."

"I can't help what you believe. That's your business—but don't go butting into mine," Slick said, beginning to get kinda mad at me. "I don't want any help from guys that think I'm a bushwhacker. To hell with you! Besides—I'm right where I want to be. Nobody can shoot through these jail walls. It's three weeks until my trial comes off. So get out of here and take care of your ranch and sell that coal for Miss Sally."

"All right, son," I told him, "if that's the way you want it, that's the way it'll be. I'll have an offer for the coal in a few days—but I can't sell it without the owner's signature, so it won't do much good!"

"Well, according to reports, you've got a good forger handy, right where he can't get away from you. It ought to be easy to fix up."

"Wonder where Jack Hamlin really is, Slick? You wouldn't know, would you?" I asked, knowing he wouldn't tell me.

"Hugh, you've got me there. You know as much about him as I do in that respect. You've seen him since I have!" Slick couldn't look at me while he was saying this. Kinda bit his lip and looked away.

"I've got a power of attorney he left me, but it doesn't give me the right to sell any land. Maybe you could make me a new one, Slick?"

"Hell—that's breaking the law," Slick said, laughing at me. "You wouldn't want to go and do that. Particularly when you don't have to. Sometimes I wonder how you ever run a ranch successfully, using your head as little as you do."

"What's my head got to do with it?" I asked, getting kinda sore at his laughing at me.

"You don't have to sell your land. Lease it to them, you poor dumb son-of-a-gun."

"NEVER thought of that," I told him, amazed at my own thick-headedness. "Thanks, son. It's an idea. Anything I can get you or have sent to you?"

"Not a thing, Hugh. Thanks just the same. Tell Lefty to come back tomorrow night, will you? I want to talk to him again. If he asks you for some money afterwards, give it to him out of my belt. How is Miss Sally?"

"I hate to tell you," I said. "You wouldn't like to know how she feels toward you."

"Go ahead," he said. "Murderers can't afford to be sensitive. I can stand almost anything."

"Well, you asked for it," I told him. "The first day after they took you away she was hysterical, laughing all the time like something funny had just happened. Then she calmed down some and seems to be in her right mind. Seems just as sane as she was years ago—just like nothing had ever happened. She's glad as hell you are in jail, son. In fact she hopes they hang you higher than a kite. She's a little worried that maybe they won't convict you. She sure does want to see justice done."

"Well, bless her heart!" he surprised me by saying. "It's kinda queer, the twists a woman's mind takes, isn't it, Hugh? Reckon it would cure her—if she found out for sure I killed her brother and her husband didn't?"

"It might." Anything might happen, why not that?"

"Well, so long, Hugh—don't stand here gabbing all night. Bet you look funny standing on a barrel and craning your neck to talk through a jail window. Folks would laugh if they caught you. So long—see you at the trial. Bring all the stuff in my war bag, will you? There might be some evidence there that will help convict me. Might be the best thing that could happen to me—to get hung and cure Miss Sally up all at once."

"So long, son," I told him, puzzled as all get-out. He must have something up his sleeve, I thought to myself. Nobody, not even in story books, is going to get himself hung on the hundred-to-one shot of curing a crazy woman. Even when she is as pretty as the picture on a tomato can!

The next night Lefty went to town and got back around daylight. He ate a little breakfast and slept a spell. He got up, cleaned his gun and was saddling when curiosity got the best of me.

"Leaving us, Lefty?" I asked him.

"Yea."

"Need any money?"

"Five hundred bucks." That was all he'd say. Not another word out of him. So I gave him the money and he took his horse and hit the trail. I gave him half an hour's start and then put Roots to trailing him, just to see where he went!

Roots came back two days later and reported. Lefty had gone over the hills to Pinon, turned his horse loose and bought a ticket for Las Vegas. Roots wired somebody he knew in Las Vegas to get the low-down on him. Lefty had bought two horses, a pack saddle and some grub—and headed up the Cimarron for the Arizona line. Looked like Lefty had up and run out on us!

CHAPTER XV

THE thing about the whole sorry mess that worried me the most was the shock to Miss Sally. I figured that going back and digging up all this trouble would make her worse—maybe completely crazy. But it didn't—it worked the other way. She calmed down a couple day after Slick's arrest and was just as sane as you or me.

She wasn't the happy, carefree girl she had been before all this trouble, of course, but she was a grown-up young woman—with a mind as sharp as a whip. She wouldn't let me sign up the deal with Jerry Jackson right off. She made me see a lawyer first. Me, Hugh McGovern, that had been running her ranch since she was knee-high to a chew of tobacco!

Jerry Jackson came back from Cerrillos with an offer to buy certain sections of land around Signal Rock, or lease it for ninety-nine years and pay us two dollars a ton for all coal mined. We were to provide right-of-way for a spur track to the mines. It seemed like a mighty good proposition to me, and I told Miss Sally so.

She said, "Better see a lawyer, Uncle Hugh, before you sign up. A good lawyer."

"Well, I like that, honey," I told her, acting like I was kinda resentful. Shucks, I'd been a lawyer myself, away back before the war, and thought I still knew all about it.

"Uncle Hugh," Miss Sally said, "if you had been any good as a lawyer you'd still be one, instead of being out

here worrying over cattle and coal and whether the grass will last until Spring and all. Anyway, you can forget an awful lot in thirty or forty years." You could tell she was turning something over in her mind besides the coal proposition. I never could rightly understand the workings of a woman's mind, but I've noticed a time or two that when they are looking off into space they are hardly ever thinking about what they are talking about.

Finally she asked, "Uncle Hugh, as a lawyer, did you believe in justice?"

That stumped me for a while. Come to think about it, I reckon I was more interested in winning cases than in justice.

"As a lawyer I reckon I wasn't—but as a man I believe in a fellow getting what's coming to him. People have got to pay for what they do, one way or another."

"How does a man pay for murder?" she asked me and I could tell she already knew the answer, but wanted me to say it for her.

"With his own life, honey," I said. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, you know."

"Yes, I know." She studied this over for a spell. I could tell she had made up her mind to something and was hunting around in it for some good reasons for what she had decided. "Just supposing," she went on, "that a murderer who should be hanged for a crime gets convicted on false evidence. Supposing he's guilty, but they prove it by the wrong evidence. Would that be justice, Uncle Hugh?"

"Legally, I guess it would be all wrong," I told her, not knowing exactly what she meant, but having a good idea. "They would hang him just the same, even if the evidence was cooked up. Just between you and me I would say that it would be justice."

"Even if he gets framed by a bunch of crooks who aren't interested in justice—men that just want him out of the way—would that be all right, Uncle Hugh?"

"Yea, honey, I'd call it that. If the skunk deserved to hang it wouldn't make much difference what they used for evidence."

MISS Sally studied that over some more, and hummed a little and went on sewing on the dress she was making. Finally she spoke again. "Was it this coal business that Jack and Harry quarreled about, do you think?"

"I'd just be guessing if I said so," I told her, and that's what I was doing, just guessing. "But as near as I can see it they must have had an offer for the ranch. Reckon Jack wanted to sell and Harry didn't."

"That was no reason for a killing."

"Nope, it wasn't," I said, seeing that maybe she was still just a little insane, or at least confused in her mind. "Jack just had a bad streak in him, I guess. He couldn't help it. His daddy was quite a heller before he got married and settled down. And, maybe Jack didn't do it, Miss Sally. Maybe this Slick Davis did it and Jack is really innocent."

"Do you believe all that you hear, Uncle Hugh?"

"Well, not all of it. Generally I sift it down a mite—but Norcop told me he had an open and shut case. Ironclad. The man is just as good as hung right now!"

"If this all hadn't happened," Miss Sally said, her eyes filling with tears, "my baby would be two years old by now." So she knows, I thought—she knows all about it. "And you don't have to tell me any more lies about it, Uncle Hugh. I've known it for some

time now. That's why I'll hate Jack Hamlin until the day I die."

"There, there, honey," I tried to soothe her.

"Don't there, there me, Hugh McGovern!" she flared at me, stamping her foot. "I'm just as well and sane as you are—maybe saner—and you needn't there, there me. I'm all right now, and I am going to stay that way!"

I didn't take much stock in what she said. Drunks are always telling how sober they are, and crazy people are the same way, I've heard.

"So you go and see that lawyer, Uncle Hugh. And you get that coal deal signed up before Slick Davis comes to trial. He may be a crook and a murderer, but he told you right about the coal. Whoever is trying to steal it will quit until the trial is over and by that time will have it sold and can get out of the country for a while. We're going to Denver or San Francisco or somewhere and have some fun. Then when everything blows over, we can come back and start in all over again."

"Sure we will, baby," I told her, wondering all the time just how much she knew that she wasn't telling. How did she know it wouldn't be safe for me until the coal deal was signed up? I could see her point better than she could, so I hightailed it for town to see Van Ardsdale, the high-priced lawyer I'd imported to defend Slick Davis.

"That's a pretty good offer," Van Ardsdale told me when he had looked the deal over. "It's a good price for right now—but this country is growing fast, and ten years from now coal may be worth a lot more than it is now. Better just sign a ten-year lease, Mr. McGovern, with the privilege of renewing it at current market prices."

I THANKED him and got him to draw me up a new lease and all, and started to leave. "Can I ask you one personal question before you go, Mr. McGovern?" Van Ardsdale asked.

"Ask all you want," I told him. "If it's too personal I likely won't answer it, but ask away."

"How do you stand on this Slick Davis proposition? You hired me to defend him, yet he is supposed to have killed Harry Blake. Naturally, I'd supposed you wanted Harry Blake's killer punished. I'd like to get that little matter cleared up before I start on the case."

"Look," I said, between the devil and the deep blue sea, for I didn't know myself what was right or what should be done. I liked Harry Blake—raised him from a pup. Convicting Slick wouldn't bring Harry Blake back to life, however. "Here's how it stands: I told Slick Davis I would get him the best lawyer possible to defend him. You're the best I've heard of in this neck of the woods. You defend him. If you need anybody to help you I'll get 'em for you. If you can prove him innocent, I'll be damned glad of it. If he's found guilty I'll help pull the rope that hangs him. But you do your best!"

"You don't seem to have much faith in Slick Davis," Van Ardsdale said.

"I've seen killers before," I told him. "Some of them were men you'd like under ordinary circumstances. They were good fellows until they got a mean streak on them—and then they were lower than a snake's belly. Something gets into their blood, I guess. So I can like this guy, Slick Davis. I can admire his guts, I can feel grateful to him for saving my life. But he's still a killer and ought to be punished."

So he gave me my new coal contract, changing a few ifs, ands and buts and covering up little loopholes that the railroad lawyer had left in the contract.

"Known this Slick Davis long?" he asked, as he handed me the final contract.

"Couple of months," I told him.

"How did he impress you when you first saw him?" Van Arsdale asked. "Before you knew anything about him?"

"He looked like a man to ride the river with, Mr. Van Arsdale. He looked like Jack Hamlin—but right off the bat he seemed different."

"How would you say he was different."

"Well, I can't exactly put my finger on it," I told him. "Jack Hamlin was an easy-going kid, likeable, kinda lazy, but good natured as all get-out. He didn't want the responsibility of running a ranch. Said I was doing all right, so why should he bother. But this guy—this Slick Davis—well, he started right in telling me what to do and making me like it. He started in running the place like Jack Hamlin's daddy would have done if he had been here. I'd say offhand, that way back somewheres before Slick went to the bad that he must have been a good man. Must have come from good stock."

"What kind of a man is Art Norcop, Mr. McGovern?"

"HELL, stop calling me Mr. McGovern," I told him. It had been so long since anybody called me Mr. McGovern that I wasn't sure who they meant when they did. "My name is Hugh. Norcop is all right, I reckon. He has done a lot to help clean up this neck of the woods. Stands in good with the law and order element, goes to church and don't get drunk in public."

"All right," Van Arsdale told me, "I'll do the best I can for Slick. Join me in a snort or two before you start back to the ranch?"

"Mr. Van Arsdale," I told him, "I never drink, except for nine or ten reasons, and I've got 'em all now. After you, sir." An understanding man, this Van Arsdale, I thought as we went down to the bar. We had a few quick ones, a few slower ones and a couple of stirrup cups thrown in to boot. Put me in good shape for my ride back to the ranch. A man my age has got no business gallivanting around on top a horse, anyways—but I had to get around and I would have been damned before I'd admit old age was creeping over me and driving a buggy. Man had just as well give up when he gets to the buggy stage.

On the way home I rode by the big cottonwood where Slick had stopped us from hanging Lefty that day. Where was Lefty, I wondered. How did he fit into the puzzle? What was he up to now? The more I thought about him and the things that had happened, the more I felt that the time was ripe for some wholesale rustling. With everybody going to town for the trial there wouldn't be much in the rustlers' way.

So I ordered guards at all the line camps. I set the boys watching the herd down on Lonesome River, night and day. I almost had a small revolution on my hands—they all wanted to go to town for the trial!

"Hell," I told them, "they'll hang this guy just as high without you around to watch them. You throw your lazy behinds in the saddle and get going."

"Shucks," Shorty McGuire said, "if it wasn't that Old Hennery was such a good cook I'd up and quit the place. I wouldn't work for no old Simon Legree like you if it wasn't for the grub."

"You go to hell, you young squirt," Old Hennery said, but I noticed that he slipped a dried apple pie in Shorty's grub-sack for him.

CHAPTER XVI

I TRIED to keep Miss Sally away from the trial. I thought that digging up the past and reminding her of all that had happened would be bad for her. Might give her a relapse. But it developed that Miss Sally had started running her own life again.

She sorta snorted when I told her that I thought she had better stay home. "Uncle Hugh, I like you very much. You are a very nice old man. I love every gray hair in your head, Uncle Hugh—but just the same I am going to town and stay for as long as the trial lasts. You just try to stop me!"

"Shucks, child," I told her, "I'm too old a man now to start telling a woman what to do. A few years back, if you'd got sassy I'd have up and dusted your overalls for you. But I guess you've grown into a young woman now and ain't to be argued with. You want to go horseback, or you want the buckboard hitched up?"

"I expect I'd better take Maria with me, Uncle Hugh. What do you think?"

"What do you care what I think, you sassy baggage? Don't go trying to make up to me by asking me what I think. You just tell me what you want, Miss Astor, and I'll have it brought around for you."

"Well, Uncle Hugh, I couldn't very well ride horseback in the new dresses I've been making, and I wouldn't want to go to court in my overalls. So you have the buckboard hitched up and Maria and I will go in that."

So I hitched up for her and she and Maria loaded their gear in the back and they were off in a cloud of dust, giggling like a couple of girls at their first Sunday School picnic.

Everybody for forty miles around, and his brother, came to Silver City for the trial of Slick Davis for the murder of Harry Blake. The hotel was loaded to the eaves. Ma Bradford's boarding house was fairly bulging. Folks slept in wagons and tents and under the counter in the stores. Lots of the boys bunked in the loft at Dad Cooley's livery barn. Some, not being able to find a place to sleep, just stayed up all night in the saloons and gambling houses and did their sleeping in the courtroom. The gamblers coined money hand over fist, the Chinaman couldn't feed them as fast as they came. Yes, sir, Silver City was loaded to the gills for the trial of Slick Davis.

The Federal Judge, who came down from Santa Fe to run the trial, was John McGilvray. He was raised in the Territory, had been a cattleman himself. He knew the people, their ways and the country—and was pretty well liked by everybody. He was known as a fair and just judge throughout the Territory—so I was sure there wouldn't be any monkey business worked on Slick Davis. He would be tried fair and square and if he was guilty he would be hanged. If the evidence showed he was innocent, Judge McGilvray would see that Slick got a square deal.

EVERY trial I've been to they have had quite a time fighting over who gets on the jury and who doesn't. This one might have known the defendant, and that one had a cousin who was a sheepherder and the other one used to court the sister of the defendant's top hand, and all that kind of thing. Yes, sir, there had always been considerable fuss picking the jury at all the trials I had ever been to. That's why I couldn't understand Van Arsdale, the lawyer, I'd got for Slick, not questioning any of them very much. Oh, he'd ask a few questions now and then, but

nothing that proved anything much. Van Arsdale practically let Art Norcop pick his own jury without a squawk—and a lousier bunch of jurors I've never seen at any man's trial.

Monty Montgomery was the very first juror picked—and everybody knew that Monty was gunning for the guy that had taken his wad one night. Later they even made Monty foreman! Two of Frank Reilly's older hands got on. And when Norcop picked Jose Amador that worked in Monty's gambling hall I knew that the bars were down. They even picked old Mike Teague, who had been drunk all the seventeen years he'd been in the Territory and made a living doing odd jobs around the bars and dance halls. Why, the dice were loaded against Slick Davis from the start.

I was downright disappointed in Van Arsdale. I had thought, from his record and the fee that he was charging, that he'd be a regular miracle worker—but he was sure getting off to a bad start. You can't expect a man to know all about total strangers, of course, but he could have asked around a little.

They finally got the jury all lined up and sworn in, and the judge came in and took his place—and we all got the surprise of our lives! Sheriff Banks came in with the prisoner hand-cuffed to him. It wasn't the man I'd seen go to jail at all. At least it didn't look like him!

The fellow hand-cuffed to Sheriff Banks was the spitting image of Bluebeard, the man who had tended bar at Smoky Joe's, over in George town, around the time that Harry Blake was killed. The crowd in the courtroom was plumb surprised, and so was I. We'd been looking for Slick Davis, and they brought us that bearded jigger, with his curly, matted black beard!

I was still more surprised when he waved at me as he went by and said, "Howdy, Hugh, you old fossil. How you been?" It was Slick's voice, the voice I'd come to know right well. Judas Priest, I thought, what's going on here? Not only does he look like Jack Hamlin, he's grown a beard and looks like Bluebeard, now. Where will he break out next, I wondered.

"Who is this man, Sheriff Banks?" Norcop asked.

"It is Slick Davis, I reckon," Banks answered. "Anyway, he's the same guy I put in jail a month ago. If he was Slick Davis then, he's Slick Davis now."

"Your honor," Norcop said to the judge, "I object to the defendant appearing in court in his present condition. He is obviously trying to confuse his identity. I demand that the defendant be required to shave off his beard."

McGILVRAY was plainly stumped. Reckon nothing like that had ever come up before at one of his trials and he didn't have any precedent to fall back on. Finally he asked Van Arsdale, "do you have any objections to your client's shaving, Mr. Van Arsdale?"

Van Arsdale talked to this Bluebearded Slick Davis for a minute or so and then said, "Your honor, my client had no intention of confusing his identity. He tells me that his jailer refused to furnish him hot water to shave with, or a mirror. He asks the court to excuse his appearance. He will be very glad to have someone shave him. However, he has no money, so it will have to be at the expense of the prosecution, if they want to have him shaved."

The courtroom broke into laughter at this. Quite a joke it was, in a country where practical jokes are graded high. The judge rapped for order. Barber Day was finally called out and this bearded jigger was shaved. Sure

enough, it was Slick Davis, all right, clear down to that jagged scar.

Then Norcop called his first witness, and it made me kinda wonder if there wasn't some truth in what Slick had told me about an organized gang working in the Territory. Monty Montgomery on the jury, two of Frank Reilly's men on the jury—and the first witness was none other than Smoky Joe Jackson, that ran the Crystal Palace over at Georgetown. Frank Reilly owned the Crystal Palace. Looked like a tie-up somewheres!

The bailiff swore Smoky Joe in and Norcop went right to work building him up an airtight case against Slick. Norcop asked, "What is your name and occupation?"

"Joseph Jackson. I own and run the Crystal Palace, a saloon in Georgetown."

"Did you, at any time prior to the death of Harry Blake, employ a bartender called Bluebeard?"

"Yea, I did."

"When did he leave your employ?"

Smoky Joe scratched his head a while, pretending he was trying to think. Pretending he hadn't already been told what to answer. "I don't remember the exact date," he finally said, "but it was the same day Harry Blake got killed."

Norcop asked next, "Did this Bluebeard look anything like the defendant did when he first came in? Before he was shaved, that is?"

"Well," Smoky Joe was puzzled, like he hadn't been rehearsed on this question. "It's been a couple of years, but I'd say he looks a lot like Bluebeard."

Norcop said, "Thank you, Mr. Jackson. Any questions, Mr. Van Arsdale?"

"Just one," Van Arsdale said. "How do you remember so clearly, Mr. Jackson, that this so-called Bluebeard quit the same day that Harry Blake was killed?"

"Well, for one thing," Smoky Joe said, "Young Jack Hamlin was drunk that night and wanted to shave Bluebeard, just for the hell of it. And for another thing, Harry Blake asked for him later in the evening. Wanted Bluebeard to help him get Jack to go home—Jack and Bluebeard being kinda good friends. I had to tell them both that Bluebeard had drawn his pay and quit that morning. Said he was leaving the country."

"Thank you, Mr. Jackson," Van Arsdale said, looking as pleased with himself as if he'd accomplished something. I couldn't see what, but maybe he had.

NORCOP'S next witness was old Barber Day, the jigger that had just finished shaving Slick a little while before. Old Barber Day had been shaving folks in Grant County ever since Heck was a pup. He'd kinda got along in years and was a little bit shaky at times. Occasionally he'd drool a little tobacco juice on a man he was shaving, but he hadn't blinded anybody yet, so folks kept going to him and running that risk for old times' sake.

Norcop asked him what his name was.

"Hell, Art," Barber Day said, "you know my name as well as you do your own. It's Henry Day."

"So it is, Henry, so it is," Norcop said. "I know you are a barber, too—but I'd like mighty well if you'd say so yourself, so we can put it in the records."

"Some folks might not agree with you," Day told him. "There are folks unkind enough to say I'm both a butcher and a cut-throat—and some allow I'm a barber, all right. That's my personal opinion, too."

"Have you ever seen the defendant before?"

"Him?" Day asked, pointing to Slick.

"Yea, I've seen him before."

"When was the last time you saw him before today, Henry?"

"It was a couple of years ago, the day Harry Blake got killed. I shaved the dirty son then, just like I did here in court today."

"Tell us about it in your own words, Henry," Norcop said.

"Well"—Barber Day spit his tobacco in the general direction of the cuspidor, hitched up his pants, looked important, and went on—"Well, I was a setting in my shop about sundown, wondering whether I should close up for supper or wait for the gamblers to come in and get shaved first. A couple of guys come in. One of 'em was this bartender, Bluebeard."

"Who was the other man, Henry?" Norcop asked.

"Dunno. He had a handkerchief over his face. Dunno who he was."

"What did the man with the handkerchief do?"

"Hell, you said for me to tell this in my own words, Art. Now you quit asking me questions. I'll get her told all right by myself."

"Go right ahead, Henry."

SO HENRY DAY took another shot at the cuspidor and went on. "This guy with a handkerchief on his face stuck a gun in my ribs—and told me to whack the whiskers off of Bluebeard."

"And did you?"

"Yessiree! I whacked the whiskers off of him in no time flat. Any damn fool would of had the sense to do that with a gun in his ribs." Barber Day was kinda insulted, Norcop asking him what he thought were unnecessary questions that way.

"What did you find under the whiskers, Henry?"

Barber Day pointed to Slick. "That guy over there," he said, "he was lurking under them there whiskers. I just whittled down through that beard and there he was all the time—just like he was today!"

"You are sure it is the same man?" Norcop asked.

"Sure as shootin'! Scar and all!" Barber Day said. "I'd remember that scar, coming on it like I did under all that brush. His beard had been matted over it so's it wouldn't show. It's the same guy, or my name ain't Henry Day."

"What did you say after you shaved him?" Norcop asked.

"I said—'I'll be damned.' And he said what did I mean by that?"

"And—"

"I said—'I'll be damned if you don't look a whole lot like Young Jack Hamlin'," Barber Day said.

Then Norcop leaned forward like he was drawing the important part of the testimony out of Barber Day. "What did this man say when you told him he looked like Jack Hamlin?"

"He didn't say a word," Day said, "but the jigger with the handkerchief over his face pulled back the hammer on his gun and poked it in my ribs. He told me if I ever mentioned shaving Bluebeard, or his looking like Jack Hamlin he'd come back and cut my throat with my own razor."

Norcop asked, "What did you say?"

"What would anybody have said? I said—'Yes, sir'!"

"What happened next, Henry?"

Day said, "They give me a hundred dollar bill, and told me again to keep my trap shut and then they beat it."

"Thank you, Mr. Day," Norcop said. "Your witness, Mr. Van Arsdale."

"Why are you telling this now, Mr. Day?" Van Arsdale asked. "Why are you telling this now, when you have been afraid to talk for two years?"

Day said, "Well, I was kinda afraid

to tell it before now. I didn't want to get my throat cut. Anyway, nobody would have believed me, if they hadn't seen it done like I did it today. And it does seem impossible for two guys to look alike, thataway."

"Then why are you telling it now?" Van Arsdale insisted.

Norcop butted in. "Your honor, I object. Mr. Day's reasons for telling his story can have no bearing on their value as evidence. I object to useless badgering of this heroic old man who has risked his life to bring a criminal to justice."

"Objection sustained," McGilvray said. "Court adjourned until two o'clock this afternoon."

Slick waved at me as I walked past him, going out to dinner. "Looks kinda bad for me, don't it, Hugh? Never would have taken me for Bluebeard, would you? Bet mothers use me to scare their babies for years to come." He was laughing at me, mocking me. Whistling to keep up his courage, I reckon.

Yes, sir, I had something more than the Chinaman's tough steak to chew on at dinner time. I had a new slant on the whole business. It was all clear as day to me how Slick Davis could know so much about Jack Hamlin and know everybody in the county, too. Hell, bartenders know everybody. What they like and how they act and the kinds of stories they laugh at. What I couldn't understand was why Slick had thrown his gang down to take up for Miss Sally. Surely he must have seen her, and known who she was, before he agreed to do the job he started and then quit on!

I reckon there must be a little streak of good in everybody. Maybe Miss Sally being sick like she was had found his soft spot. Guess no man falls so low that he'll rob a woman that's half crazy most of the time. I sorta found myself getting a soft spot in my heart for this Slick Davis and wishing I could help him somehow. I hunted up Van Arsdale to see if maybe he couldn't work a miracle and maybe get Slick off with a life sentence or something.

CHAPTER XVII

NORCOP'S first witness, when the trial took up that afternoon, was Dad Cooley, who ran the Livery Barn. Next to Old Hennery, he was the leading liar in the county and the best-liked old man in town.

"What is your name?" Norcop asked.

"Stonewall Jackson Cooley!" he said, proud as a peacock. Funny thing, in all the twenty years I'd known him I'd never heard him called anything but Dad.

"Your business?"

"I am the owner of Cooley's Red Star Livery Stable and Feed Barn!" Dad was proud of his little business.

"Have you ever seen the defendant before?"

"Yep—lots of times."

"When was the first time you ever saw him?"

Dad Cooley said, "It was the night that Harry Blake got killed."

"Tell us about it, Dad," Norcop said.

"He come into the livery barn about nine o'clock that night," Cooley said. "Man with a mask on his face came with him. The man with the mask held a gun on me, while that guy"—he pointed to Slick Davis—"saddled up the horse that Bluebeard, the bartender, had been hiring regular. Good horse, it was—four-year-old bay gelding."

"What did you do?"

"I didn't do nothing. I had a six-shooter in the middle of my back. What could I do?"

"Excuse me, Dad," Norcop said, laughing with him. "I put the question wrong. I should have asked what you said to those men."

"I said—'Durned if you don't look like Jack Hamlin's twin brother. If it wasn't for that scar on your face, I'd say you were Jack Hamlin himself, stranger.'"

"What did he say?" Norcop asked.

"He said—'Shut your trap, grandpappy, and keep it shut—or you'll wake up dead, in the morning'!"

"What did you do then?"

"I shut up like he told me to," Dad Cooley said. "I told him I hadn't ever seen him, hadn't ever heard of him, and didn't ever want to see or hear of him."

"Then what happened?" Norcop wanted to know.

"The man with the gun give me $300 for the horse and the gear. $150 would have been plenty. He said the rest was for keeping my mouth closed. Said I might live out my allotted four score and ten years, or something like that, if I just kept my trap shut."

"Thank you," Norcop said. "Your witness, Mr. Van Arsdale."

"No questions," Van Arsdale said. "Far be it from me to harass another kindly old gentleman who has risked assassin's bullets and all that to testify. He has the true aroma of chivalry, or maybe it's livery, about him. I do not wish to persecute him any." Folks in the court laughed and started warming up to this Van Arsdale a little. Maybe there are more ways than one of getting next to a jury.

NORCOP then brought in Clay Shives, bouncer at the Crystal Palace, the place that Smoky Joe ran, that Frank Reilly owned, and that Bluebeard had worked in.

"Tell the jury your name and what you do for a living," Norcop told him. Clay wasn't very good at answering questions, not running much to gray matter, but he could do what he was told right well.

"Clay Shives is my name. I'm the bouncer over at the Crystal Palace. I throw drunks and such out," he said, looking right at Mike Teague in the jury box—and everybody in the place just howled until the Judge rapped for order.

"Do you remember Bluebeard, the bartender?" Norcop asked.

"Do I? Sure," Shives said. "The dirty son has owed me nine bucks for over two years. Sure, I remember him."

Norcop asked, "When did you see Bluebeard last?"

Shives answered, "The day Harry Blake got killed."

"How do you remember the day so well?"

"Because Bluebeard got $500 that day and he beat it before he paid me my nine bucks. That's how!"

"Who gave Bluebeard that much money?" Norcop asked.

Shives answered, "I dunno who it was. They was sitting in a booth and this guy's back was to me—I couldn't hardly see him. Couldn't see his face at all."

"How do you know he gave Bluebeard the $500?"

"I heard him counting it out," Shives answered. "I heard him say—'Here's $500 in advance and I'll give you the rest when the job is done.'"

"Then what happened? Where did Bluebeard go from there?"

"About that time, one of the guys who is now serving on the jury got to cutting up a little," Shives answered. "I had to go and throw him out on his ear. When I come back both of them was gone. Never saw either one of them again until today. Never got my

nine bucks, either."

Norcop said, "Thank you! Your witness, Mr. Van Arsdale."

Van Arsdale asked, "How many more jurors, besides Mr. Teague, have you had to exercise your profession on, Mr. Shives?"

Norcop objected to this and the Judge bore him out—said it had nothing to do with the case. Then the court hushed down quieter than a church, when Norcop asked Miss Sally to take the stand.

HE ASKED her what her name was. "Sally Blake Hamlin." She spoke out plain and clear like she was sure of herself and what she was doing. Slick was watching her with a funny look, kinda proud like, on his face. Gentlemen, you would have thought he was downright proud of her—even if she was going to testify against him.

Norcop asked, "What was your relation to Harry Blake?"

Miss Sally answered, "He was my brother, and my husband's best friend."

"Where were you when your brother was killed?" Norcop asked her. I could have wrung his neck for asking her questions like that, but it didn't seem to upset her any.

Miss Sally answered calmly and clearly, so that all in the court could hear, "I was on the porch of our ranch house, not twenty feet away."

"Would it distress you too much to tell us about it, in your own words?" Norcop asked.

"No, not at all," Miss Sally said. "My husband and brother had been to Georgetown for the evening. I wasn't much company for my husband in those days and he and Harry often went to town at night for amusement. Harry came home alone that night and said that Jack would be along a little later and for me not to wait up. I turned to go inside. I heard a man walk around the side of the house. Then Harry said—*'Don't do it, Jack, don't do it!'* Then the man shot Harry and Uncle Hugh came and I don't remember anything for a long, long time."

"What did the man look like—the man who shot your brother?" Norcop asked.

Miss Sally said, "He looked like the defendant." She had to pull herself together to say it, like a horse gathering itself for a jump, but she finally got it out, plain and clear and loud enough for the jury to hear.

"Do you say that Slick Davis killed your brother, Mrs. Hamlin?" Norcop asked.

"No, I didn't say that." Miss Sally looked straight at Slick, her eyes right into his, so he could read what was in them. "I said the man who killed Harry looked just like the defendant. It could have been him—or it could have been somebody who looked just like him!" She had said—Slick Davis, or somebody that looked just like him. But I could tell that the thought had come to her the other way around—*Jack Hamlin, or somebody that looked just like him.*

For the first time at the trial there was doubt written all over Miss Sally's pretty face!

"Thank you, Mrs. Hamlin," Norcop said. "I hope we haven't distressed you too much."

"Not at all, Mr. Norcop."

"Your witness, Mr. Van Arsdale."

"Your honor," Van Arsdale said, addressing the judge. "I ask that this witness's testimony be stricken from the records. She is known to be at least partially insane and her testimony is of no legal value."

Norcop butted right in again. "Your honor, I object. I anticipated this move, and had Mrs. Hamlin examined

by Dr. McClary. He found her quite sane."

Judge McGilvray asked, "Is that correct, Dr. McClary?"

DOC McCLARY was as happy to say it as I was to hear him say it. "Your honor, it is true." He got up and said, "I have given her every known mental and physical examination. She is a well, healthy young woman, in her right mind!"

"Objection sustained," McGilvray said. "Proceed, Mr. Van Arsdale."

You could have knocked me over with a feather! Here was the shock that had done the trick—the shock that had put Miss Sally back to normal again. I'm not a religious man, but I thanked God that morning in the courtroom in Silver City. Trial or no trial, Slick Davis or no Slick Davis, guilty or not guilty—I didn't give a damn! I was the happiest man on God's green earth. Miss Sally was well!

"Just one question, please, Mrs. Hamlin," Van Arsdale said, in a soft, kindly voice. "Did your husband, Jack Hamlin, have a scar on his face at the time your brother was shot?"

"No, he did not," Miss Sally said.

"Did the man who killed your husband have a scar on his face?" Van Arsdale asked. There was a question—if she said "No" the whole case was blowed up. If she said "Yes" Slick Davis was guilty as hell. But she said neither. Everybody in the courtroom was leaning forward in their seats, waiting for her answer.

"I honestly don't know," she said, disturbed by the thoughts that were in her mind. She really didn't know—and yet so many things hung on her knowing. "It was rather dark, and things happened so fast. I don't know whether he had a scar on his face or not. I just saw the other side of his face, as nearly as I can remember it."

"You cannot say positively he did, or didn't have the scar?" Van Arsdale asked.

"No, I'm sorry, but I don't know."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hamlin. That is all. And permit me to congratulate you on your recovery."

"Court adjourned until nine o'clock tomorrow," the Judge said.

I looked over at Slick on the way out. He wasn't at all down in the mouth, like a man should be when he has got the deck stacked against him. He looked back at me and grinned. He didn't say a word, but I got the message from him. Without saying a word, he told me, "Everything is going to be all right, now, Hugh, you old son of a she-dragon. And when the time comes, I'm counting on you to bust me out of jail."

VAN ARSDALE walked out of the courtroom with me. "The defendant tells me you know Jeff Malone, the banker, very well," he said. "Do you suppose you could go over to the bank and snoop around a little. I would like to know who made any big withdrawals of money around the time Harry Blake was killed. You never can tell—we might uncover something that way. Might find out who put Slick up to it—he won't tell me—and maybe we could get the sentence swung around to life imprisonment. The way things stand now he is sure to be convicted and hung."

"All right," I told him. "I'll get me a bite to eat and slip over and see what I can worm out of the old weasel." I joined Miss Sally at the Chinaman's and we had quite a talk while the cook was burning my steak the way I liked it.

Miss Sally was still looking a little disturbed, like she did in the court-

room. "You know, Uncle Hugh, there is something funny about this whole case. Do you suppose all these witnesses are really telling the truth?"

"Yea, I reckon they are," I told her. "They're not men that would lie an awful lot in court. Particularly Dad Cooley and Barber Day—they're both honest as they come."

"Uncle Hugh, I think that this Slick is being framed up, somehow," Miss Sally surprised me by saying. "Everything is just too smooth, too pat—seems to me there would be a hitch somewhere or a little disagreement if it was all on the level."

"No, honey," I told her, "I am afraid everything that's been said is true. I'm just afraid that Slick Davis killed Harry. I hate to say it—I've taken a sneaking liking to him. He saved my life—but it looks like Slick was guilty."

"I wish I could be sure. I wish I could believe that Slick did it and Jack didn't—I'd be the happiest woman in the country. It isn't that I want to see anybody hung, Uncle Hugh. I've got over that. Goodness knows, there's been enough people killed already. But I would like to see Slick convicted, just so I would have a better opinion of Jack Hamlin."

"Well, don't you fret, he'll be convicted all right, honey," I told her. "Looks like I'd have to bust him out of jail when they do convict him. After all he has done lately, I wouldn't feel right about letting him get hung. Sure wish Lefty was here. He'd be a big help in a jail break."

"I like Lefty," Miss Sally said. "He may have been an outlaw, but I like him. He's a man you can trust. And he never would ask you any questions. And he's not gone for good. Slick is Lefty's friend, so he will be back."

"Maybe so, child," I told her. "Maybe so. Sure was glad to hear Doc McClary speak his piece today. Nothing I would rather have heard him say."

"Oh, I've been all right ever since they arrested Slick. Just all at once something happened and it was me again. I knew it just like that." She snapped her fingers to show me.

"Well, you rest a while," I told her, happy as I could be. "I've got to slide over to the bank and catch Jeff Malone before he closes up. Got a few things to talk over with him. See you later on."

So I went on over to snoop around old Jeff's office and learn what I could. Almost without trying I learned a few things that upset the whole blamed applecart!

CHAPTER XVIII

OLD JEFF was sitting at his desk, his boots cocked up in front of him, cutting him a chew of Horse Shoe when I got over to the bank.

"Howdy, Hugh," he said, "have a chaw?"

"Don't care if I do," I told him, whittling me off a cud. Don't particularly like eating-tobacco, but you got to humor a man when you're going to separate him from information.

"Need any money?" Jeff asked.

"Not right now. Just dropped in to pass a little time with you and see how things were going."

"Haven't loaned out a thin dime since this blamed trial started," Jeff said.

"You don't say."

"Yep, things have been right quiet. But it looks like this here Slick Davis was going to get convicted. Wish they'd hurry up and get it over with, so as people will remember their own troubles and start borrowing a little money."

"Yea," I told him, "it looks like they were going to hang the deadwood on Slick."

Jeff Malone asked, "Did he really kill Harry Blake—or are you still sticking to the idea that Jack Hamlin done it?"

"I dunno, Jeff," I answered. "He says he didn't do it, and he has shown himself to be a mighty good man in some ways. Lots more of a man than Young Jack Hamlin ever was. Sometimes I think it's too bad Slick didn't get away with his act. Might have been the best thing all around. What we didn't know wouldn't have hurt us any."

"Young Jack was all right," Jeff said. "He just hadn't got his growth when all this happened, or he would have acted different. How much longer you reckon the trial will last?"

"Not long," I said. "Norcop's got his own jury and he has a pretty good case built up, to boot."

"You know, I never did like that jigger," Jeff said. "Norcop's got too damned much money for an honest man. Shucks — lawyers never were hands to lay up much money. And county jobs don't pay hardly anything."

"Where do you reckon he got it?" I asked, not especially giving a damn, just making talk until I could maybe learn something.

"Dunno, Hugh," Jeff told me. "He claimed to have made quite a pile on those right-of-ways for the railroad."

"Could be. There was a lot of money changed hands in those days."

"Last four or five years he's been banking lots of money. Claims it is an old note being paid off, and such."

"Reckon maybe that's it," I said, hoping he would get through with Art Norcop so I could pump him a little.

"Guess it's none of my business," Jeff said. "He sure has got him a wad, though. Why, look at his account, Hugh"—Jeff took a whale of a big book out of the safe and thumbed through it—"look how he has piled up the money in the last few years. December 1st, deposited $1985.50. April 10th, deposited $1600 even. July 17th, deposited $2500 even."

JEFF went on down a long list of deposits over a period of three or four years. Made quite a tidy sum when it was all added up.

"He's not much of a spender, either," Jeff went on. "Very few withdrawals of any size. Biggest one here is $1200, way back a couple of years ago. November 18th, to be exact. Sure do wonder where his mine is, or who he is shaking down. There ain't enough political graft in this county to buy a horse and saddle."

There—without even trying, without wanting to listen—I had the information I was after practically forced on me! November 18th was just two days before the death of Harry Blake! Norcop was mixed up in it, the lying hypocrite! He was in on it somewheres! I tried to keep cool and not let on to Jeff how excited I was getting.

"Well, Jeff, reckon I better get back to the hotel and see how things are going," I told him as calmly as I could, hardly being able to wait to get my news to Van Arsdale. "May have a lot of money for you to handle one of these days, Jeff. Got a big deal on. Thanks for the chew!"

"Ya welcome, Hugh. Drop in again."

Norcop had been with the surveying parties that had mapped out the railroad. He knew the country. He could have easily stumbled on those coal lands! I hurried over to the hotel and told Van Arsdale all about it.

Van Arsdale wasn't the least bit surprised. "You never can tell what will come up when it rains, Hugh. Lots of folks have pasts—particularly out here in the Territory, where no ques-

tions are asked. Looks like we'd better dig into Norcop's past a little. Maybe we can find the skeleton in his own closet. Wish we had more time to work on this. How long has he been in the country?"

"Nine, ten years, I reckon—something like that. He and old Judge Brennand used to be partners," I told him, trying to think back the best I could. "Then, a while back, Norcop joined the church and pulled out on the Judge. First thing you knew he was the champion of law and order and got to be county attorney.

"Where did he come from?" Van Arsdale wanted to know.

"I don't know. That's a question we don't ask out here. So long as a fellow minds his own business, we don't dig around in his past much."

"Well, find out," Van Arsdale barked at me. "Get his record. Where he came from and why he left and all that. Maybe we can get Norcop all tangled up in his own rope. Maybe we can get public opinion against him. We might get a hung jury out of it and a new trial. Maybe by that time Slick will be willing to tell me something."

How I was going to get Norcop's record in a hurry, I didn't know. Me, an old worn-out foreman with a yen for a slug of rye to take the taste of that Horse Shoe out of my mouth—hell, I didn't know shucks about tracking down a man's past.

I TOOK my quart of rye and went on up to my room and nursed it a while, wondering how I was going to find out what Van Arsdale wanted to know. I didn't even know where to start cutting his trail. I went to sleep wishing I had Lefty back to help me—Lefty knew a lot about the crooks and the wild bunch in that part of the country.

Next morning, things worked themselves out, like they mighty near always do, if you leave 'em alone and give 'em a chance. Norcop played right into my hands. The minute the trial opened, he asked for a twenty-four hour adjournment. Claimed he'd got track of another very important witness he'd been hunting for, and he'd have him here in twenty-four hours.

Van Arsdale, the old hypocrite, put up quite a fuss about Norcop's stalling around. He pretended to be highly indignant over such a delay, but Norcop finally won out and the judge granted the adjournment—giving us a day of grace to pin the deadwood on Art Norcop.

Just as the judge was telling us it was all over until tomorrow, Lefty Allen eased in the door and took a back seat. He looked tired and dirty and hungry as a wolf—but kinda pleased with himself. Cowthief or no cowthief I could have kissed him, dirty as he was. Here was some help—the help I'd been wanting—right when I needed it the most!

Lefty said, "Howdy, Hugh."

"Howdy, Lefty. I'm right glad to see you," I told him—and I was.

"You don't say," Lefty said. "Didn't know you'd even missed me. Always glad to see you. Got a weakness for antiques, I reckon. How's Jack making out, or Slick, or whatever you are calling him by now?"

"He ain't doing so good, Lefty!"

"Hell, he should have let me saw him out of jail when I wanted to," Lefty said. "Looks like I was going to have to do it anyways. Can't expect things to run right without me around to watch 'em, I reckon. But I had to go and take a little trip. Few things Jack wanted dug up. Took a little time. What seems to be eating on you?"

So I told him about the trial and

Norcop and how Van Arsdale wanted a report on Norcop and his past. "You got to help me track all this down, Lefty," I told him. "Shucks, I wouldn't know where to start."

"Glad to do what I can, Hugh," Lefty said. "You let me kinda study this over for a while, while I get me a shave and wrap myself around a setting of eggs and the back half of a hog. Food's been mighty scarce up where I've been. I could eat most anything right now."

"All right, Lefty," I said, glad to wait for his help. "You run on up to my room and clean up a little. Help yourself to the rye, and then we'll go and fill you full of ham and eggs and augur things out a little."

"Sounds all right to me, Hugh. Rather eat without bothering about all this dirt, but I guess some folks is finicky and you got to do things the way they like when you are around them."

SO LEFTY shaved and put on one of my clean shirts and I sat and watched him wrap himself around a setting of eggs and about half a ham and a couple of plates of fried potatoes —all washed down with six, seven cups of coffee.

"Guess that'll hold me until supper time," he said.

"Reckon it'll take the edge off a little, anyways," I said. "Where have you been that they starve a man?"

"Here and there, Hugh, here and there," Lefty said. "Reckon that there was plenty to eat—but I was kinda hitting the high places and didn't stop to see, the last couple of days. Been doing a little traveling for Jack and he said not to waste no time."

"Stop calling him Jack—his name is Slick."

"All right, Hugh, have it your way," Lefty said. "Slick or Jack, it don't make no difference. Call him Moses if you want to—he's still the best man in these parts. He's a square shooter, all right. You're a square shooter, too, Hugh—bet you pay your bills prompt and don't never cheat nobody—but shucks, that ain't everything. You got to stop and figure things out and ease your conscience and be sure you're doing the right thing and all. Now me, I'm different. If a friend of mine gets in trouble I don't stop to think is he a horsethief or a murderer or does he beat his wife. You've got to overlook little things like those in your friends."

"Maybe you are right, Lefty," I said. I shouldn't have said "maybe"—all at once it was clear to me that Lefty was right! Slick Davis was my friend—his killing Harry Blake didn't have anything to do with that fact. I had to forget the killing and go to bat for Slick like he would have done for me.

"You're darn right I'm right," Lefty said. "Tell you what let's do. I been thinking. The best place to start cutting Norcop's trail is up there in that office of his. I'll just take me a little snooze until dark, and then we'll bust into Norcop's office and see what we can run across."

"That's an idea, Lefty. Take your snooze up in my room. Good soft bed. You can sleep twice as fast as you would ordinarily. Might get all caught up by dark. *Quien sabe?*"

SO LEFTY hit the hay for the balance of the day. Around sundown he showed up looking good as new. We ate some more, had a few drinks, and watched some of the boys play faro until it got good and dark—and then we cat-footed it up the street to Art Norcop's office. Things had come to a hell of a pass when I, Hugh McGovern, had to turn sneak thief and bust into a man's office at night.

"You jigger for me, Hugh," Lefty said. "I'll ease on in and take a look-see and pick up anything that is laying around loose." He had him a bunch of keys and got the door unlocked in nothing flat. He wasn't any greenhorn at busting into places, this Lefty Allen. No, sir. I stood in the shadows, out of the light—expecting any minute that somebody would come and catch us robbing the District Attorney's office. But nobody caught us—and finally Lefty came back, empty handed.

"That Norcop sure ain't a trusting soul," Lefty said. "Not a blamed thing lying around loose. Nothing in his deck but blank paper and pens and all. He's got a big safe in there—could be all his stuff is locked up in that. Nothing less than dynamite would open it."

"Won't dynamite make a right big racket, Lefty?" I asked, getting kinda dubious about the whole thing.

"Yea, it'll make plenty noise, and likely bring a crowd down on us." Lefty scratched his head and pondered some. "Tell you what—I better do it tomorrow morning when everybody is at the trial. You can sorta tangle 'em up in the courtroom door so as they won't get out so quick to see what the noise is all about. You get me three, four sticks of dynamite and plenty fuse, first thing in the morning. I'll blow her open while everybody is down at the trial."

"All right," I told him, kinda relieved to get out of actually doing any dynamiting. "You are the head safe blower. Anything you say goes. Need any money to help pass the night away?"

"Naw, I still got most of what you gave me," Lefty answered. "What I need more than anything is some more shut-eye, but I guess there ain't no place left in town to sleep. Reckon I better ride out a piece and bunk down in the grass."

"Bunk up in my room some more," I told him. "I ain't been sleeping enough of nights lately to make it worth while to go to bed. You just as well get some good out of my bed." So Lefty went to bed and I roamed around the bars a spell and finally got in a poker game and won forty odd dollars and the first thing you know it was breakfast time.

I went over to Bill Myers store to get us some dynamite. Been buying supplies from Bill Myers for over twenty years, and I knew he'd not ask any questions or shoot off his mouth any about me if things happened. Hell, he didn't care what I did with the stuff I bought from him as long as I paid for it once in a while.

I got Lefty his dynamite. Didn't know how much fuse it would take, so I got him a hundred feet of that. I put the stuff in his room where he couldn't miss it, got me a shave at Barber Day's and went to the trial with my fingers crossed—hoping I could tangle up the mob that was going to make a rush for the door when Lefty set his dynamite off!

CHAPTER XIX

NORCOP came to the trial that morning, buzzing like a rattlesnake ready to strike! Whatever his ace-in-the-hole evidence was, it was good—for Norcop was all wound up for the kill when the trial took up that morning. The bailiff yelled for everybody to stand up, the Judge came in, and we were off! But we hadn't any more got started than Lefty Allen eased in the door and took one of the back seats.

Lefty had kind of a fishy look on his face. He was doing his best to hide his thoughts, but every once in a while the corner of his mouth would pucker

up a little and he would have to bite his lip. He'd hardly got settled good in his seat when Bang!—there was a hell of a big explosion up the street. Sounded like an earthquake!

Some damned fool yelled out, "It's robbers! They're dynamiting the bank!" And the crowd tore out of that courtroom like a flock of blackbirds. The Judge tried to keep order and stop 'em, but it was like trying to stop a whirlwind. Finally everybody was gone but the Judge, the Sheriff, Slick, Lefty, Van Arsdale and me.

"Court recessed for fifteen minutes," the Judge said, with a twinkle in his eye. "Have to get in my grunt and groan somehow and uphold the dignity of the law. Watch the prisoner, Banks, while I satisfy the judicial curiosity." He went on up the street, too, to see what was what. Didn't know the old boy had that much sense of humor.

"What happened, Lefty?" I asked, curious as an old woman myself. "What did you do—dynamite the bank so as the crowd would go up there, or what?"

"Bank's all right, Hugh—that was just some locoed idiot guessing," Lefty said. "That was Norcop's office leaving the country that you heard."

"Better draw me another picture," I told him, "I hear what you are saying, but it don't mean anything."

"It's like this, Hugh," Lefty said, kinda holding out on me as long as he could. "I get up there and got to fiddling around with that old safe, and first thing you knew it came open all by itself. Didn't need no dynamite. Cleaned her out good." He patted his pockets, all bulging with Norcop's papers.

"Well, what was all the noise, Lefty?" I asked.

"Oh, that? Shucks, Hugh—there I was with four sticks of dynamite and a hundred foot of fuse. That much stuff is hard to hide, Hugh. I just put her in Norcop's safe and lit a match to her for good luck, that's all. Never did like that Norcop, no how. Then I took my foot in hand and here I am. If they get checking up, I got an alibi—I was here when it went off, wasn't I?"

Folks finally got back to the courtroom, including Norcop. He was sore as a boiled owl, and worry was written all over his face. I could see him looking over the folks in the courtroom, eying first this one and then that one, wondering who was gunning for him. His office was wrecked, his safe blown to hell—and all the records of his transactions were gone. Reckon he wanted to get through with the trial and look into his own private affairs, for he didn't waste any time turning his wolf loose on Slick Davis.

NORCOP'S ace-in-the-hole witness was an old, wrinkled, good-natured looking Mexican. It couldn't be—yes, gentlemen, it was—it was none other than the jasper Jack Hamlin had used for an alibi, two years before. It was Jesus Garcia himself. The truth would soon be told—we'd soon know whether it was Slick Davis or Jack Hamlin that Miss Sally had seen shoot Harry Blake down in cold blood!

"What is your name, señor?" Norcop asked him after he had been sworn in.

"Jesus Garcia, as you know."

"What is your profession, Señor Garcia?"

"At present, I have none, señor," Jesus said, in his best school-book English. "I have, in the past, trapped, herded sheep, and done many things."

"Did you ever live on Salt Creek?"

"Si, señor. Several years ago I lived over there and did a little trapping and raised a cow or two."

"Why did you leave there?" Norcop asked.

"Because my mother, in Chihuahua, she was sick."

"And why did you come back here now? Was it to go trapping again?"

"No, señor," Jesus Garcia answered. "It was because word had come to me that somebody who looked like Jack Hamlin had been arrested for killing Harry Blake. I came back to tell the court what I knew of this matter."

"Why should you return just because you had heard that?"

"Jack Hamlin was my good friend, señor," Jesus said, "and I did not want any harm to come to him or his family if I could help him."

"When did you see Harry Blake last, Señor Garcia?" There it was—the beginning of the end for somebody. The question that was going to bring out the answer to everything that had been bothering me for two years!

Jesus Garcia said, slowly and distinctly, so the whole court could hear, "It was the night before I went to Chihuahua to see my mother, God rest her soul."

"Where did you see Harry Blake that night?" Norcop asked.

"He came to my little house on Salt Creek, señor, as he had done many times before."

"Why did Harry Blake come to your house that night?" Norcop asked.

"He came to ask if Jack Hamlin could stay the night there. Jack was very *borracho,* very drunk, and could not continue to his own house!"

THERE it was! The thing I should have known—the thing I should have believed when Jack Hamlin told it to me!

Norcop asked, "What did you do, Señor Garcia?"

"What any man would have done. I put Jack in my bed and told Harry Blake that I would care for him like my own brother. In the morning Jack felt better and went home. I turned out my few cows and went to Chihuahua."

Norcop asked, "Can you swear that Jack Hamlin stayed in your house the night that Harry Blake was killed?"

Jesus couldn't swear to that. "I do not know what night it was that Harry Blake was killed, señor. It was the night before I went to Chihuahua that Jack stayed in my house."

"You bought a ticket for Chihuahua the morning after Harry Blake was killed. We have checked that with the station agent," Norcop said.

"Jack Hamlin did not kill Harry Blake, señor. Any man of intelligence would know that. But if it is proof you need—Jack Hamlin spent the night you speak of in my house. I do not know the exact hour he left the next morning, but the sun was well up before he went home. Why did you not ask Jack Hamlin this thing—he would have told you!"

"Thank you, Señor Garcia," Norcop said. "It was kind of you to come all the way from Chihuahua to testify. Your witness, Mr. Van Arsdale."

Van Arsdale asked, "How long have you known that Harry Blake was killed, Señor Garcia?"

"I do not know exactly, señor. News travels slowly in Mexico. I do not think that I heard of it until several months after Harry Blake was shot."

"Why didn't you come back sooner, if you wanted to help your friend Jack Hamlin?" Van Arsdale asked.

Jesus Garcia looked at Van Arsdale as if he was wondering how anyone could be so stupid. "Excuse me, señor—I forget that you did not know Jack Hamlin. But I, who knew him, why should I return? Who would be fool enough to believe a thing like that about Jack Hamlin?"

Amen, I thought! Who but a fool would have believed any such thing about Jack? A boy I'd raised by hand! This humble old Mexican put me to shame with his simple belief.

I looked over to see how Miss Sally was taking it. She had been fairly drinking in Jesus Garcia's testimony, watching every expression of his face, listening carefully to every word. At first she seemed mad about something, then puzzled, bewildered. As Garcia's testimony went on her face lit up with the happiest look I'd seen on it since she came to the Jack-in-the-Box as a bride! Like a little girl seeing her doll house for the first time—that was the way she looked when Jesus Garcia stepped down from the stand. Finally her voice cracked out across the courtroom, sharp and clear, with a ring of hope in it.

"Is it true, what he said, Anonymous?" she asked.

"Every single word of it, Miss Sally," Slick said, cool as a cucumber, even though he was practically admitting his guilt by saying so.

"I should have known, I should have known," Miss Sally cried. "I should have known." Guess she'd be saying it yet if she hadn't slipped to the floor in a faint.

BY THE time we got her revived and sent to her room the morning was all shot. McGilvray ordered the court adjourned until afternoon—so I tore over to the hotel to see how Miss Sally was.

She was fully recovered when Lefty and I got there. We sat down to dinner with her—a little flushed and excited—but her old self again.

"That was a big thing Slick did, child," I told her, "practically admitting his guilt just to make you feel easier in your mind. Guess he killed Harry all right, but let's not be too hard on him. He's a man!"

"Uncle Hugh," she said, not paying any attention to what I was saying, or at least it looked like she wasn't. I never could follow a woman's mind around when it was working on something. "Uncle Hugh, if I am sane like Doc McClary said I am, and part owner of the ranch, would you take orders from me?"

"Why, yes, I reckon I would, honey." I hadn't thought about it, but I reckon I'd have to, or else quit, if it came to a showdown.

"Even if you don't like the orders?"

"A man's supposed to carry out the owner's order or quit," I told her.

"You wouldn't quit me, would you, Uncle Hugh?" she asked knowing I wouldn't.

"Of course not, child, of course not," I told her.

"Well, listen," she said, her eyes sparkling with mischief, "I hate to spoil your night's rest, but I want every man on the ranch here in town when the trial takes up in the morning. And I want every man armed to the teeth. You've got to go out and get them tonight—you've got to bring every last man in from the line camps and everywhere."

"All right, boss," I told her. "Orders is orders. Lefty will take care of you while I'm gone. And don't blame me if somebody steals all your cattle that I've got sold to Stud Markham."

"To hell with the cattle." It was the first time I'd ever heard her cuss. "And never mind about Lefty taking care of me. It's Slick"—she kinda stumbled over the name—"it's Slick I'm thinking about, Uncle Hugh. We're not going to let them hang Slick. There's been enough killing already. If they convict him tomorrow, we are going to get him out of jail somehow. I want that court house surrounded with Jack-in-the-Box

men when the trial opens in the morning. I want every gun on the ranch here tomorrow!"

How spunky she sounded to me, speaking out like Old Harry Blake himself. Not, can you do this?—but, I want this done. Yes, sir, Miss Sally sane and able again!

THERE was nothing for me to do but throw it in the saddle and hightail it for the ranch. This I did, making it out in four hours flat, which is pretty good riding for an old gent in his sixties. I woke up Roots and Fats Bledsoe, and headed them for the line camps. I called in the boys guarding the herd down on the river. I gave 'em orders to be in town, every man of them, fully armed—by the time the trial took up in the morning.

"Hugh, I could kiss you," Bert Wilson said, saddling his horse and starting right off. "I been yearning for the bright lights. And I ain't had a drink in a week."

I took me a few little nips and had a a nap, got me a fresh horse and jogged back into town, getting there just in time to sit down to breakfast with Van Arsdale.

"How you betting on the trial, Hugh?" he asked me.

"I wouldn't give no odds on Slick," I told him. I've always been one to speak my mind, honest and open. "When I hired you I thought I was getting a lawyer. Shucks—you haven't even asked a good healthy question, yet."

"Hugh, you are right—I haven't done a thing," Van Asrdale admitted. "They tell me you used to be a lawyer—so maybe you can tell me what to do. How are you going to defend a man that practically admits that he is guilty? Why, this Slick Davis won't turn a hand to keep from getting hung. He won't tell me a thing—he won't take the stand in his own defense. He won't offer an alibi. I don't think he cares whether he is convicted or acquitted. Just between you and me, I think that he had that other hard-case, Lefty, round up some of the wild bunch. I think they've got a jailbreak planned, Hugh—that's why Slick isn't worried any."

"You find anything in all those papers Lefty got for you?" I asked.

He didn't look at me when he answered, but I was just making talk, anyway, and didn't attach much importance to it. "Oh, there were a few interesting things, all right, but nothing we can use in the trial. No evidence that will help Slick."

"You don't say."

"Yea, it really looks bad for him. Well, I guess I better get along and try for a life sentence, anyway."

I swilled down a few more cups of coffee to keep me awake a few hours more, checked over the boys from the ranch to see that they were all outside the court house instead of inside some saloon, and then went on in to the trial.

NORCOP was all wound up, giving it to the jury hot and fast, when I got in. He was saying, "Gentlemen of the jury, the defendant, Slick Davis, practically convicted himself, trying to confuse his identity by growing a beard during the three weeks he spent in jail. That one seemingly unimportant act made it ten times easier for us to show you the various steps he went through in changing himself from Bluebeard, the bartender, into Slick Davis the murderer."

Norcop paused a spell and let this soak in. "We have shown you how, as Bluebeard, the bartender, he got much information and made many acquaintances useful to him later in his impersonation of Jack Hamlin. We

have shown you that Bluebeard accepted money to do a job. You have heard the testimony of Barber Day who shaved Bluebeard, the very day Bluebeard took his money. You have seen him shaved right here before your eyes and know that this transformation is possible. Mrs. Hamlin has practically identified him as the man who killed Harry Blake. Her testimony proves that he, or someone who looks just exactly like him, did the killing. The only other man who looks just exactly like the defendant—Jack Hamlin—has been proved to have spent the night of the killing with Jesus Garcia. So who else could it be—according to the evidence? It could be no one else, gentlemen, no one else. The defendant, Slick Davis, is guilty, beyond the slightest shadow of a doubt, of the murder of Harry Blake!" It made my blood boil to hear Norcop calling those barroom scum "gentlemen" and demanding the life of the best man in the Territory in the same breath.

"—and so, gentlemen of the jury, I call on you to pronounce the defendant, Slick Davis, guilty of shooting Harry Blake down in cold blood, as he has probably since shot down Jack Hamlin. Shot him down to steal his ranch and cattle from Jack Hamlin's widow. So I charge you, it is your solemn duty as citizens of the Territory of New Mexico, to find the defendant Slick Davis guilty of the murder of Harry Blake."

Short and to the point, Norcop was. He put up a good, airtight case against Slick. Even if the jury hadn't already been down on Slick Davis they would have convicted him—but shucks, Slick was as good as convicted when the jury was picked. The trial really wasn't necessary at all.

It was about time, I thought, for Van Arsdale to rub his rabbit's foot and dig deep in his bag of tricks and pull out a surprise. Nothing short of a miracle could save Slick Davis now! But Van Arsdale was just a big false alarm—just a big bag of wind. He sounded off for ten or fifteen minutes, until he had the jury yawning in his face, about things they never knew existed. He appealed to their Christian charity. He told them to temper justice with mercy. He hollered some about their higher duty. He wasted a lot of good, flowery language on those buzzards in the jury box that day. Yes, sir, Van Arsdale was a washout, a total washout with the jury.

Slick Davis enjoyed every word of it. He didn't seem at all worried. If he did, you couldn't tell it to look at him. He just sat there, calm and collected. Looked as sure of himself as a man with two aces showing and another in the hole. Guess he was counting on Lefty to round up the wild bunch and break him out of jail. Or maybe he just didn't give a damn—I couldn't tell from watching him.

The jury was only out about three minutes. Made up their minds in a hurry. Seems like they might have taken a little longer and made a pretense of arguing some, just for appearance' sake. But they didn't—they filed back in, took their places in the box, and the foreman, Monty Montgomery, read the report.

Monty said, "We, the jury, find this dirty skunk, Slick Davis, guilty as hell!"

CHAPTER XX

"GUILTY as hell!"—that's what the jury had decided, but it didn't seem to bother Slick Davis a bit. If anything, it seemed to please him. Guess a man likes to have his own judgment confirmed, even if it is against him.

"Slick Davis, you have heard the verdict," Judge McGilvray said to him. "Have you anything to say before I sentence you?"

"Why, yea, your honor, I'd kinda like to get in a word or two edgewise, if I could. Mr. Van Arsdale here didn't want me to get on the stand. He was afraid I might convict myself. But that's all been handled, now—and I'd like to say a few words, if you don't mind, your honor."

"Proceed," McGilvray said.

"Can I come up there by you, your honor?" Slick asked. "I want everybody to see and hear me good—it may be the last time they'll see or hear me."

"I see no objection," McGilvray said, so Slick went on up and stood by the Judge, where everybody could see him. Sheriff Banks was at Slick's right, to watch him.

"Your honor," Slick said, "you represent the law in these parts." Slick's hand darted out, quicker than a snake's fangs. He snatched the gun from Banks' holster and jammed it in the Judge's back, quicker than it takes to tell! "That is, you did stand for the law, up until now—but now I'm the law as far as you are concerned, your honor! Banks, you and your deputies get over there and face the wall or I'll blow the Judge to hell and back! Don't let anybody out of the door, Lefty—it's my turn to talk, now, and, by golly, I'm going to say it without any interruptions!"

"Got me two six-shooters and a sawed-off shotgun, boss!" Lefty yelled back at him. "Hold the door 'til hell freezes over if you say so!"

Judge McGilvray was as calm as a man could be with a six-shooter rubbing on his spine. He'd been around the Territory a long, long time—and knew when to stand on the dignity of the law, and when not to. He said, "There is no use disputing Colonel Colt, Banks. You and your deputies stand by the wall like you were told." He turned to Slick, with a sort of speculative grin on his face. "Just what do you have in mind, young man?"

Slick said, "That will develop, Judge, that will develop. First of all, I would like to ask you a few questions. That is, if you don't mind, your honor."

He must have pushed the gun a little deeper into McGilvray's short ribs, for McGilvray answered right back, "Not at all, not at all. You're in the saddle, young man—go right ahead." I do believe McGilvray was kinda enjoying himself for a change. Judges must get awful tired of hearing about people's troubles and the way lawyers mess things up sometimes. Here, at least, was something that wasn't routine.

MISS SALLY was watching all this with a look of complete admiration on her face. Her mouth had fallen a little open with amazement, her eyes were as big as saucers. She was enjoying herself as I hadn't seen her enjoy anything in years.

Slick asked, "Can they hang a man that is already dead, your honor?"

"The law would consider that unnecessary," McGilvray said.

"If I am guilty of the murder of Harry Blake, nobody else could be guilty, could they?" Slick asked.

"No," McGilvray said.

"Then that poor little woman over there will no longer have to bear the shame of thinking that her own husband killed her own brother?"

"No, young man," McGilvray said, "the conviction of Slick Davis completely clears the name of Jack Hamlin of any suspicion of guilt."

Suddenly Miss Sally exploded! She giggled like a school girl, long and loud

and plenty. Crazy as a loon again, I thought — Doc McClary must have missed something.

"I just couldn't keep from laughing any longer, your honor," Miss Sally said to the Judge. "I am so sorry. Anonymous, you stop teasing that poor old Judge. He didn't do anything to be treated so mean. And put down that gun, you don't need it any more. I've got thirty men, all loaded for bear, around this court house!"

"Why, thanks, Miss Sally," Slick said, "that's help I hadn't counted on."

"Hurry up and get it over with, won't you, Anonymous?" Miss Sally asked him.

"Sure thing, Miss Sally," Slick said.

Click—just like that—all at once it all added up. Every little piece of the puzzle dropped into place in my mind. "Pour it to 'em, son!" I yelled. "Here's another gun behind you!" I dragged my belly gun from under my shirt, ready for anything that might happen. Handy, these belly guns—you can carry 'em anywhere, even in courtrooms where guns are not supposed to be carried.

"Judge," this so-called Slick went on, "do pardon these little interruptions, won't you? And do overlook my methods of getting things done." He was humble and apologetic, all but the devils dancing around in the back of his eyes. "Reason I asked all these questions, Judge, is that Slick Davis is dead! I killed him over three months ago, up on the Cimarron. I broke his back with these two hands, Judge—like I'd kill a snake!" He wheeled and talked straight to Art Norcop. "Slick Davis is dead, Art—and you're the next thing to it! Keep him covered, Hugh."

SO I swung my gun on Art Norcop—and Frank Reilly and Monty Montgomery, too. They'd all three seen their numbers coming up, I reckon, and had kinda got together for the blow-off.

"Who the hell are you, young man?" McGilvray roared, forgetting his dignity in all the excitement.

"Who am I, Miss Sally?" Anonymous asked.

"You are my husband, Jack Hamlin, thank God," she said, and I knew it before she said it. I knew it when she had giggled out in court a few minutes before. How I knew I couldn't say, but I knew it.

"Who am I, Hugh McGovern, you thick-headed old son-of-a-gun?"

"Jack Hamlin, damn your eyes!" I yelled, happy as a boy in a watermelon patch. It was a great day!

"Doc McClary, come up here," Jack ordered. McClary came up and shook hands with him and said, "Howdy, Jack."

"Howdy, Doc," Jack said. "Long time no see. Take a look at this scar on my face." McClary looked it over. "How old would you say that scar is, Doc?"

"Hard to tell exactly. Two or three months, I'd say. Not over three months, anyways."

"It couldn't possibly be two years old?" Jack asked.

"Nope—three months at the most."

Jack asked, "And this tooth, Doc, how long would you say it had been out?"

"About the same length of time, two or three months."

"Who am I, Doc McClary?" Jack asked.

"You are Jack Hamlin, you young whipper-snapper," McClary said. "And if you are through with all this rigamarole, I'll be on my way. Got lots of patients that really need something done for them!"

Jack asked one more man who he was—and the way it was answered

made me ashamed of myself for the next seven years!

"Lefty Allen, who am I, anyway?"

"Hell's fire, boss, I don't give a damn who you are, but since you ask, you are Jack Hamlin."

Jack said, "How do you know?"

"Boss, you told me so." It was as simple as that with Lefty. Jack Hamlin said so—that made it so!

"Thanks, Lefty, thanks. Your honor, my friend, Lefty Allen"—Jack looked straight at this ex-cowthief, Lefty, as he said it, proud to call him his friend. "My friend Lefty Allen has just come back from a little trip up the Cimarron with evidence that will end this case once and for all. Tell 'em about it, Lefty."

"It wasn't nothing, boss," Lefty said. "I just went where you told me and dug in a snow drift like you told me. It was cold as well digger's, up there—but I found what you sent me after and brought it back just like you told me to."

"What did you find and bring back?" Jack asked.

"Boss, for nobody but you would I do anything like that again. I dug a frozen man out of that snowdrift. Stiffer an a cake of ice, he was. If I hadn't of knowed you was in the hoosegow, I would have thought he was you! I put him on a packhorse and brought him in. He's on a slab down at Billy Steen's undertaking parlor right now. He is Slick Davis—but you won't have to hang him, Judge—he's already slightly dead!"

"Thanks," Jack said. "I knew you'd get it done all right. Mr. Van Arsdale, would you carry on from here? I'd kinda like to go and sit by my wife a spell." He went over and sat by Miss Sally.

"Sally!"

"Jack!"

THAT was all they said—not a word more. Things were right as rain again and they didn't even bother to talk about it. Just sat there and held on to each other while Van Arsdale talked it out with the judge.

"Your honor," Van Arsdale said, "this trial has sort of turned into a comedy of errors, as you can see. I move that the charges against my client be dismissed. He is, obviously, not even connected with the case. And I charge you, Sheriff Banks, to hold those three men," he pointed to Norcop, Reilly and Montgomery. "I have sufficient evidence right here to show that those three planned this murder themselves and had the now-dead Slick Davis perform it."

"Hold them, Banks, until we can do a little investigating," the Judge said—but those three didn't wait to be held. As one man they went through the window, glass and all! Art Norcop, Frank Reilly and Monty Montgomery—crashing away before either Lefty or I could throw a gun on them. How they ever broke through our thirty men outside I'll never understand. Guess it's hard to stop desperate men.

McGilvray rapped for order. "Jack Hamlin, the case against you is dismissed. The evidence convicting Slick Davis automatically exonerates you. You are not guilty of murder. You have, however, outraged the dignity of this court. You cannot make a monkey out of a Federal Judge and expect to get off scot free."

"I was only trying to clear my name, your honor, in the only possible way," Jack said, grinning sheepishly, like a kid caught stealing jam.

"Well, your name is cleared, young man," McGilvray thundered at him. "But you have outraged the dignity of this court—and you've got to pay for it. I hereby fine you five hundred dollars

for contempt of court—the same to be spent in providing liquid refreshment for all present."

"Thank you, your honor, it will be a pleasure," Jack said right loud, so that all could hear. "The town is wide open, folks. Go to any bar you want and don't pay for anything. It's all on me tonight—every last drink."

So Silver City was wide open that night—kegs were broached and barrels were tapped and liquor flowed free. Nobody paid but Young Jack Hamlin—and why shouldn't he pay? He'd just got back mighty near the whole world. Why should he worry about three or four thousand dollars to get half the county drunk?

CHAPTER XXI

IT TOOK us two hours to eat supper that night—but I can't, for the life of me, remember a thing that we had. All I can remember is that it was right good to sit down to supper with Miss Sally and Young Jack Hamlin once more. It was the first time in well over two years that I'd seen them both together—both well and happy. It was good to know that Young Jack had given up his wild ways—that he had proved himself as good or better a man than his daddy was before him.

And there was Miss Sally—her old happy self again, her old world rebuilt around her. Yes, sir, even the Old Crow tasted better to me that night at supper with Miss Sally and Young Jack Hamlin.

The past was forgotten. All the troubles and worries and suspicions were gone. Jack and Sally didn't ask each other any questions, they didn't do any fault finding or reproaching—they just rubbed out and started all over again. And they started closer together, more wrapped up in each other than ever before.

Excuse me if I run on, gentlemen. Maybe I am just an old fool. *Quien sabe?* But if my time to die had come that night I would have died happy—knowing that the two people that meant the most to me in all the world were together again, with everything right as rain between them.

It wasn't long before I had a relapse from my contentment, however. Guess I must be turning into an old woman in my declining years. It wasn't long before curiosity got the best of me. I was just itching to know all about everything—where Young Jack had been, what he had been doing. Most of all I wanted to know how he had figured it all out and got the deadwood on Art Norcop and his gang, and how he had killed Slick Davis barehanded!

"Son, excuse a doddering old man's curiosity," I finally said, "but I am about to bust with wondering all about it. Would you take pity on an old codger and tell him where the hell you've been—excuse me, Miss Sally—and what the hell you've been doing, and how you got it all figured out so neat?"

"Whoa, whoa—one at a time, Hugh," Jack said. "Maybe I'd better go back and start from scratch and tell you the whole story and let you pick up your answers as I go along. Might be I'll have to stop and draw you pictures at the complicated parts."

JACK finished his steak, loaded up his pipe and got it going good and told his story. It was hard to believe—the things he'd done, and gone through. It was amazing—the chain of circumstances that uncovered the real murderer of Harry Blake!

"When I left here," Jack said, "I went down to Chihuahua — thought

maybe I could find Jesus Garcia and see if I had really spent the whole night at his cabin or just imagined I had. My mind was so mixed up that I got to thinking I might have killed Harry and not known it. Everybody had talked me into halfway believing I had been drunk enough to kill Harry and not remember it."

I told him, "I'll be ashamed all the rest of my life for my part in it."

"It's all right, Hugh, it wasn't your fault," Jack said. "Anyway, as I was saying, I went down to Chihuahua to find Jesus Garcia—but, there were at least a couple hundred Jesus Garcias down there. I chased 'em all over northern Mexico. Must have put in six weeks or two months at it before I gave it up as a bad job. I got back to El Paso and went on a drunk with some of the boys and when I sobered up I discovered that I had signed up with them to go to the Spanish War. It seemed like a good idea sober, too—so I went."

He stopped a minute and thought back, like he was weeding things out in his mind—figuring what to tell and what not to tell. Guess there must have been a lot of things in a war, especially in Cuba, that a man wouldn't want his wife to know about.

"The war wasn't any picnic," Jack went on, "but it was good hard work and it got me out of the habit of steady drinking. Reckon I'd be dead by now if I kept on the way I was started. And I learned to shoot a pistol, Hugh. Remember how you gave me up as a bad job, years ago?"

"Yea, I remember, son," I told him. "You never could shoot a pistol for shucks. That's what made me get a little suspicious of you—when you burned down those jiggers by the blacksmith shop."

"We had a sergeant teaching us. A big guy—must have weighed two fifty. Tough as a boot. He would get mad as the devil at me because I couldn't hit the target more than maybe one time in ten. One day he just up and beat the holy hell out of me. Then he handed me a pistol and said, 'Here, you lily-livered son, that target out there is me. Shoot the guts out of it!' That turned the trick, Hugh—I hit the bull's eye nine times out of ten that day."

"I hope you'll never have to pull a gun again as long as you live," I told him.

"I do, too, Jack," Miss Sally said. "I'd rather we would give the ranch away and just exist, than have any more killings."

"Seems like we all agree then, querida," Jack said and Miss Sally looked at him with a twinkle in her eyes. "Anyway, when the war was over, I decided I'd be better off working at something, so I got me a job on a freighter and sailed around the horn to Frisco. It was there, by all the Gods of Chance, that I ran into Bluebeard, or Slick Davis, or whatever you want to call him—and then the fun began!"

MISS Sally was hanging on every word he said, with that my-aren't-you-wonderful look. I always did think that love was just a bucket of foam—but maybe there is something to it after all.

Jack continued, "One night Bluebeard got to telling me about a wonderful gold prospect he had up in northern New Mexico and how rich he'd get if he just had a little money for a grubstake. I'd won quite a bit at stud the night before, so we talked it over some, and the first thing you know we were partners in this claim. Guess he had wired this Glade Connor about me and Glade had told him to get me back in this part of the country again.

So I gave Slick, or Bluebeard, some money and we agreed to meet in Denver in a week or so. We were to outfit there and then go on to Bluebeard's claim. I met him in Denver, but he didn't seem quite ready to start. Kept stalling around—claimed he had some business to tend to before we could start out. So we hung around with Glade Connor, who had turned up. I got to brooding over things and got started drinking all over again."

"Poor, poor Jack," Miss Sally said. "You needed somebody to help you, too, didn't you?"

"Well, I've got somebody now, by golly, and I'm going to hang on to them!" Jack said and you could tell that he meant every word of it. "Speaking of Glade, Hugh—there is one man we haven't accounted for."

"The hell with him," I said, "get on with your story before I bust."

"Well, Glade got a letter one day that seemed to clear the track—said it was about the mine and that we could start any time we were ready. Bluebeard and I got our stuff together and took the train for Las Vegas."

"When was it you sent the telegram son?" I interrupted, wondering how it all fit into the picture.

"I don't know. Either I was drunk or somebody else sent it. Maybe it was all a part of the scheme to let you know I might drift back into the country again. Maybe Glade sent it, figuring that Slick would get there sooner than he did. I sorta delayed his arrival, so to speak."

"You did for a fact."

"Yea," Jack went on, "the dirty son never would have got here at all if it hadn't been for Lefty. Where is Lefty, by the way?"

"Lefty is safe for the evening," I told him. "The boys have sorta taken Lefty to their bosoms. He's the top-hand with the boys, from now on out. Poor jigger hardly knows what to make of it—he never had a fuss made over him before."

"Lefty is aces," Jack said and then got going on his story again. "Bluebeard and I bought us a couple of horses in Las Vegas and packed up into the Cimarron country for three or four days. Clear up in the mountains where they only have summer on the fourth and fifth of July. It was colder than charity up there and snowing like blue blazes when we got to the cabin at the mine. Naturally I had to have three or four drinks to warm me up. They tasted so good that I went ahead and finished off the whole bottle."

HE shook his head like a man telling that something is over for good. "Not any more, Hugh—that was enough. When I came to the next day my gun was gone and I was fastened to my bunk with a leg-chain that would hold a bull. Sure was a nice way to wake up, Hugh."

"Served you right, you sot," I told him.

"Yes, guess it did," Jack said. "I never could stay just half drunk all the time like you can. I have to be either drunk or sober. Yell down and order us a couple of snorts of good cooking whiskey and I'll show you what a changed man I am. Better get Miss Sally a little bitty glass of port or something, too, so she won't feel neglected."

"Better get Miss Sally a great big glass of port," she surprised me by saying, "or, better still, a couple of great big glasses of port. This has been just as exciting a day for me as for you two old topers. Make it a good healthy slug, Uncle Hugh. Maybe I can find out what you two see in drinking."

"All right, honey," I said. "Get on with the story, Jack." I do believe

he was stalling around—enjoying himself, watching me squirm with curiosity!

Jack went on, "Bluebeard gave me all the liquor I wanted and what little I wanted to eat, but he wouldn't let me loose or tell me what it was all about no matter how much I argued or what I offered him. He was a tough guy, that Bluebeard. All he would do was to sit around and watch me and try to imitate my voice and walk like I walk. And then one day he sprung it on me—and I was the most surprised jigger you ever saw in all your born days."

"What did he spring on you, son?" I butted in, knowing I was just interrupting the story, but I couldn't keep my mouth shut forever.

"He up and lathered himself good and shaved off those whiskers of his, and there I was underneath 'em. You could have knocked me over with a feather! I thought I was drunk and seeing things, at first—so I quit drinking for a whole day and he still looked just like me."

"Did he really look that much like you, son?"

"A spitting image, Hugh. If it hadn't been for that scar we would have been just like two peas in a pod."

JACK knocked out his pipe, hitting it hard and mean on his boot heel, like his thoughts were some wrought up. "Bluebeard told me all about it after a couple of days. It was a pretty kettle of fish. He was going to kill me off and take my place. He got to hitting the bottle a little heavy himself that day and spilled the whole works to me. Reckon it didn't make any difference if he did tell me—he was going to kill me right off anyways!"

"Who all was in on it?" I asked.

"Just the four of them—Norcop, Monty Montgomery, Frank Reilly and Bluebeard. They were all that got away when the law cleaned out Jackson Hole. They drifted down here one by one and were getting by as respectable citizens until Art ran across the coal veins one day when he was out with a surveying party. That's when they cooked it all up, the dirty sons! They decided to kill Harry outright to get him out of the way. Then they were going to do away with you next, Sally—and then me. Art remembered what Bluebeard had looked like without his beard and they were going to get rid of me quietly and just let Bluebeard ease into my shoes. Then they were going to clean out the cattle and sell the place to some big coal company. Easy as falling off a log, the way Bluebeard told it!"

"Well, how come they didn't harm Miss Sally any—if that's the way it was?" I asked.

"They hadn't figured on me running out like I did. Guess it's a good thing that my friends hounded me out of the country." Jack grinned a sorta sickly grin. "I up and left the country—and left them up the creek, Hugh. With me gone they couldn't work Bluebeard in. I might come bobbing up again some day and spoil the works. They had to find me and be sure I was dead before they went ahead with their plans."

"How come you didn't watch Norcop when you came back, Jack—you never let on to me that you knew he was in on the frame up?" I wanted to know.

"Because, Hugh, the day Bluebeard was telling it all to me he was so cockeyed drunk that he called Norcop and Frank Reilly by the names they'd used up in Wyoming. Here I was looking for Al Henshaw and Johnny O'Neil, never dreaming they were Art Norcop and Frank Reilly. Art Norcop always

seemed a pretty square jigger to me—how was I to know that he was an expert forger and was going to forge my name to a deed and sell the ranch out from under you."

"It might have been a good thing," I said. "Maybe I would have gone out and got me a real job then. On a ranch with some cattle on it. Fine thing, making a man sell off his stock. What do you think I'm going to worry about all winter without any cattle?"

"Quit butting in, you rum-soaked old son-of-a-gun," Jack said, laughing. "How can I do any talking with you interrupting all the time? As I was saying, I was pretty well stupefied from drinking when Bluebeard told me all this plot. But when he told me that he wasn't going to kill Miss Sally after all—that he was going to take her over along with the ranch—I sobered up right then and there!"

JACK got up and walked around the room, his face hard and cold looking, living that time over again in his mind. "Bluebeard thought it was funny as hell! 'First I kill the brother,' he said, 'then I kill the husband—and the wife don't know about either one!' "

Jack looked at Miss Sally and you could almost see their thoughts meet. "Queer," Jack said, "there I was chained to my bunk, due to be killed any time, and yet it kinda bucked me up to hear him say that. In a way it made me feel good to be sure at last that I hadn't killed Harry Blake! If I could somehow get the word to Sally I could die happy, I thought. And then—I don't know where it came from—I heard Sally laugh, and I was ashamed of myself for even thinking about dying. I had to see her again, Hugh—I had to tell her myself and see her smile again!"

"You really heard me laugh?"

"Yea, I did, honey—and it put my mind to work," Jack told her. "Bluebeard showed me that reward notice you saw the night you were snooping around in my war bag, Hugh. He bragged on how many men he'd killed and what he was going to do to me. I pretended to go all to pieces. I begged him to let me get all falling-down drunk so I wouldn't feel it when he shot me. I really put on a pitiful performance—I didn't know I was such a good actor. Bluebeard told me that dying men should always get their last request—so he gave me a quart. I started drinking away at it, stalling for time—and, would you believe it, Bluebeard passed out cold in the chair he was sitting in. Plain dead drunk, that's what he was. Slept for five hours!"

"What did you do all that time?" I asked him. "Just sit there and admire his manly beauty?"

"Hell, no, Hugh—I went to work on that leg chain! I still had a pen knife on my watch chain—and I hacked away at the bunk the chain was nailed to. Good thing Bluebeard slept so long—if he'd have slept five minutes less I'd never have made it. It was cutting it pretty close at that!" Jack ran his hands over his eyes and sorta shuddered. "It was horrible what happened next, Hugh."

"It must have been," I said.

"Whatever you did he had it coming to him!" Miss Sally put in her two cents' worth. "Don't you feel a bit bad about it, honey!"

"Yea, he had it coming to him, all right—if ever a guy needed a good, first-class killing it was Bluebeard Slick Davis! You're sure it won't upset you to hear about it?" Jack asked Miss Sally.

"It serves you right, you darned old snoop," Jack told me. "Three-fourth of your worries come from sticking your

nose in other people's business."

"I believe you are right, son," I answered him back. "But a man my age just can't sit around and whittle. Got to keep interested in something."

"You were a grand actor, darling," Miss Sally said. "You were so good at being Slick Davis that I just knew you weren't Jack Hamlin at all. Uncle Hugh thought I was crazy—but you were so different."

"I am a changed man, honey child," Jack said. "I've given up drinking and gambling and women—well, some women, anyways. When did you find out who I really was, Sally?"

"Yes, darling, I'm sure—I'll revel in every word of it!" Miss Sally said, the blood-thirsty little baggage.

"Well," Jack went on, "I had just about finished working the nails loose—I'd cut all around 'em and had 'em just about ready, when I heard Bluebeard stirring around. I pretended I was dead drunk, but I was watching him out of the corner of my eye. I saw him pull his gun, cock it, and start toward me. Just as he bent over me to put the gun to my head I gave the chain a yank. All in one yank I pulled it loose and brought it down on Bluebeard's gun arm. I should have hit him over the head, but I didn't think quick enough. I grabbed him before he got over his surprise and we wrestled around some before I finally got him bent back over the table!"

JACK passed his hand over his eyes again, like he was trying to rub some bad picture out of them. "Reckon I was pretty mad. I just kept on bending him back and back—farther and farther—until finally his neck popped and he went all limp in my hands. That was the end of Bluebeard Slick Davis!"

Jack shuddered again at the thought of it. Our drinks had arrived by then, so I handed them around.

"Your health, Miss Sally," I said, "and mud in your eye, son."

"Here's regards, Hugh," Jack said, "and your very good health, my dear." He grinned at Miss Sally like they had some big secret between them and she smiled back the same way. Then he went on with the story. "I studied things over for a while, and decided that I would have no chance trying to make anybody believe the story that Bluebeard had told me. I studied it some more, and finally came to the conclusion that I had better be Bluebeard Slick Davis for a spell. So I cut a scar on my face with a broken bottle and knocked a tooth out with my six-gun. I threw the real Slick Davis in a snowdrift, where he stayed until Lefty dug him out.

"I holed up in the cabin for a couple of weeks, getting the liquor out of my system and letting the scar heal over. I had plenty of time to think it all out—and I finally decided to come on down here and do what Slick had been hired to do. Maybe somewhere along the way somebody would make a mistake—somebody would make a slip and tip their hand and help me prove it all to you. It was a right hard job—being Slick Davis and Jack Hamlin at the same time. A fellow can easily get all mixed up, being two guys that way."

"You didn't do so bad," I told him. "I thought you did a right good job being Slick Davis that day in the hotel at Silver City."

"You in on that, Hugh?" Jack asked, surprised that I had been able to keep something under my hat.

"Yea, I heard every word of it," I told him. I was in the next room. I had already decided you were Slick Davis, and that convinced me. When I heard you talking I thought you had fallen in love with Miss Sally and

thrown your friends down."

"IT WAS the night those men attacked you here at the ranch," Miss Sally blushed a little at the thoughts that were running around in her mind. "That night you called me 'querida' like you used to—once in a while. Nobody but you had ever called me that. And I don't think there was ever anybody around to hear you when you did call me that." She thought some more. "My goodness, I hope not," she said and got as red as a beet.

"Anyway," she went on after a while, "I knew then—and hated you. I thought you were Harry's murderer. Guess I went out of my mind again for a time. But everything is all right now!"

"Right as rain," Jack told her. "Well, that's the story, Hugh. I came on down here and met you stringing up Lefty—and you know the rest."

"I reckon it wasn't much of a good idea, hanging Lefty," I admitted, "but it seemed like a good one at the time. But hell, Lefty is so tough I doubt a hanging would have hurt him any."

"Lefty is a great guy. Well," Jack sorta hinted, "now that you've wormed the story out of me, why don't you go and fill that galvanized stomach of yours with some of that fighting whiskey you've been craving all evening? I'll bail you out in the morning if they throw you in the hoosegow! Or, if you don't want to get drunk, you must have business that needs tending to. Hell—a man wants to talk to his wife alone once in a while!"

CHAPTER XXII

JACK didn't have to bail me out in the morning—but I did have to go down and get about half of our boys out of jail. Seems like some of them had taken a notion to wreck Monty Montgomery's gambling hall, and there was hell to pay before they got through!

They were a horrible sight, when I got 'em out of jail that morning. Battered and bruised—but happy! Most of them had got their shirts torn off, some had lost their hats—but they'd had 'em a time and they were satisfied. They'd battled twice their number of gamblers and bartenders before the marshal threw down on them with a riot gun and tossed them in the hoosegow.

"Listen, you sorry sons," I told them, proud of every single one of them, "you get down to Bill Myers' store and get you some shirts and hats. Judas Priest—do you expect Miss Sally to ride home with a bunch of half-naked scarecrows like you are?"

"We ain't none of us none too flush, Hugh," Shorty McGuire said. "That's how come we started wrecking Monty's place—we thought that this fair city was no place for such a den of iniquity. They'd cleaned us out good—we just ain't got no money left."

"Who said anything about money?" I asked 'em. Shucks, the world was my oyster that morning. What was money to me? "Get what you need and charge it to me. Tell the rest of the boys, too, so there won't be any hard feelings!"

They took me at my word, and by mid morning, when we were ready to go home, the Jack-in-the-Box was all broke out with an epidemic of red shirts!

I ran into Sheriff Banks organizing a posse. He had warrants out for Art Norcop, Frank Reilly, Monty Montgomery and a half a dozen more. The stuff Lefty had found in Norcop's safe had uncovered the workings of a well-organized gang, and had proved the story that Bluebeard had told to Young Jack.

Norcop was the brains of the outfit, just like Bluebeard had told! And Bluebeard, alias Slick Davis, was one of them, too. They'd got pretty smart, did their rustling cautious like, and Bluebeard had forged bills of sale for the stock they sold from other ranches. Likely they never would have been caught if Lefty hadn't cracked that safe!

Sheriff Banks had the deadwood on the whole caboodle of them—excepting old Judge Brennand. How that old fox ever got by without getting his name signed to anything I never could figure out. Reckon he was the smartest one of 'em all—he is still alive and they're all restin' on Boot Hill.

I HAD taken Stud Markham's check for our cattle and had promised him delivery on them, so as soon as I could get the boys all rounded up we started home—to see if we had any cattle left on the ranch. It had been unguarded for twenty-four hours and lots can happen in that time. So I combed the bars and gambling halls and such—and finally got the boys all together. I had to borrow Miss Sally's buckboard and load it with a few that were still too drunk to sit on a horse—and the rest piled into their saddles, new hats, red shirts, hang-overs and all. It was a sight!

There is nothing like riding a frisky horse to cure a hang-over. If you've never tried it, I can recommend it to you. The instincts of self-preservation get going and the first thing you know you're either sober or on the ground. We loped out of town that morning with a glorious collection of drunks, and in ten miles we had as sober a crew as you ever saw. Those that fell off we dumped in the buckboard and drove their horses ahead of us.

It was a grand sight to see the Jack-in-the-Box going home that morning. Right around forty of us—strung out along the road for a hundred yards or more. Jack and Miss Sally in the lead—with all the boys in their dude shirts and new hats strung out behind, and the buckboard, loaded to the gills, bringing up the rear! It was a clear, cool morning—the horses frisked and cut up and did a little mild pitching just for the fun of it. Yes, sir, it was a sight for sore eyes to see us all a going home that morning, a real outfit again!

Old Hennery had whipped us up a right fancy barbecue by the time we got there. Roots had gone out the night before, with word of how the trial had turned out—and Old Hennery had gone right to work. There was a nice fat steer sizzling in the pit, there were turkeys and venison, and all manner of pies and doughnuts and such. He had even tried his hand at making a batch of ice cream, but it didn't turn out so good.

Everybody was right hungry after six hours in the saddle and they did justice to Hennery's feed. "That was right good grub, Hennery," Shorty McGuire said. "The meat was burnt just right for a change—just the way I like it. And them pies—why, there wasn't a fly in none of them. Yessir, it shore was a good feed. Only thing missing was a snort of that drinking alcohol you make, Hennery."

"Hell, son, it takes a man to drink my drinking alcohol," Old Hennery told him. "It won't even stay in ordinary cowhands. Just eats its way right through 'em. Shucks, you wouldn't last more than thirty, forty minutes with a slug of it in you!"

"That what makes you so proddy sometimes, Hennery?" Roots Ansell asked him, thinking to have a little fun.

Hennery could hold his own with

those boys, six days out of seven. "Shucks, son—I don't take it in any great amounts. Just a dipperful now and then. It's too blamed dangerous to take in quantities. Just a snort every now and then sorta stuefies me down to where I can stand to cook for a bunch of worthless sons like they have around this old, run-down ranch. Hell, I'm used to cooking for he men!"

LEFTY chipped in about then. "You know, Hennery," he said, "I used to work for a ranch down on the Pecos that had a man named Hennery working for 'em at one time. 'The Fighting Fool' they called him. I never did know him—that was before my time—but the Mexican women were still using him for a bogey man. If their kids got to cutting up some they'd tell 'em to go easy or they'd tell Hennery, The Fighting Fool, on 'em. Couldn't of been any of your kin, could it, Hennery?"

"Hell, son, that was me they were referrin' to. I was a fighting fool in my younger days," Old Hennery said, modestly. "That must have been me they was talking about, all right. Why, I remember one time I killed forty-one Mexicans in a knife fight, single handed. Yes, sir, them was the days."

"You kill 'em all at once, Hennery—all in one swipe—or did you cut 'em down one by one?" Roots asked.

"One by one, son, one by one." Hennery wipe his hands on his apron, cut him a chaw, and got started on a good one. "We was all at a big dance over near Pecos. Lots of Mexicans there. They got jealous because their señoritas couldn't see 'em while I was around. Finally fifty or sixty of 'em got their knives out and jumped me. I pulled my own knife—guns was barred at friendly gatherings—and went to work. I'd killed me ten or twelve of them when my knife broke off in one of them. It looked like the pay-off for me, but a lot of the boys from the place come in and helped me out."

Roots snorted. "I don't see how that makes you such a fighting fool, Hennery, being rescued by your friends. That ain't nothing to brag about."

"Who the hell said they rescued me, you young squirt?" Hennery asked in a hurt voice. "Shucks, they didn't rescue me—they just lent me their knives. They seen the trouble I was in, but they all knew I was too proud to take any help from them. They all threw their knives so they stuck in the wall handy like, where I could reach up and grab 'em. Fast as one broke off in a Mexican I'd reach up and grab me another knife. Guess I'd still be there if I hadn't finally run out of Mexicans."

"Sure getting windy around here," Roots said. "Ain't it a little early for the March storms? This is only December. Reckon I'll sleep in the dugout tonight—might come up a cyclone or something. See you in the morning, Hennery!"

It gets kinda chilly early in the evening, out here, in December—so one by one the boys drifted down to the bunkhouse. They got a fire going in the stove, started their eternal game of stud for next month's pay, and one or two of 'em had bottles that they passed around. They were all set for a comfortable night—all but Lefty Allen.

I WAS up at my own shack, just a sitting there, too blamed tired to pull my boots off and go to bed, when Lefty went by, wearing his sheep-lined coat, his rifle tucked under his arm.

"Hey, Lefty," I yelled at him, "come in and have a drink. Where in thunder are you going this time of night? I thought you'd be down in the bunkhouse winning those g r e e n h o r n s' money."

The Jack-in-the-Box was going home—
with Jack and Miss Sally in the lead!

"Figure I better take a little ride up the road," Lefty said. "Somebody ought to keep a watch-out for a few days. I'm the only good man around here—so I reckon it is up to me. You can have the day shift, Hugh."

"Lefty," I told him, meaning every word of it, "my opinion of you is a hundred proof. If you say we ought to stand on our heads, why, we will stand on 'em. Mind telling me what we got to watch for? I'll do it like you say, but I'd kinda like to know what I'm watching for."

"This trouble ain't over yet," Lefty told me, kinda disgusted that I hadn't thought of it myself. "Frank Reilly looks meaner than a rattlesnake to me. Monty Montgomery, being a gambler, is used to getting even—and Art Norcop ain't going to lose his shirt without raising a little hell. Them three jiggers ain't going to take it lying down, Hugh—they are going to try an' get back at Jack Hamlin before they leave the country! Let's don't let 'em sneak up on us, Hugh!"

"You might be right," I answered him, not taking much stock in what he said. "Shucks, if I was one of those jiggers I'd be in Mexico by now. They wouldn't have the guts to come out here and raise a ruckus."

"Maybe they won't, Hugh. Hope they don't—but just the same I'm going to keep my eye peeled for them," Lefty said. "There ain't no use in telling Jack about this—you and me can handle it all right by ourselves."

"Yea, guess you're right. No need of worrying him any more." I poured Lefty a drink and had one myself. "I'll leave the Old Crow out handy for you—and I'll tell Old Hennery to leave the coffee on the back of the stove. I know you ain't a drinking man, Lefty—but you better have a nip before you go out, just to ward off chills and fevers and things like that."

"Well, down the hatch, Hugh. The good die young!" Lefty gulped his Old Crow and was off to play watch dog. Risking his life and health that cold winter night to look after Jack Hamlin's interests for him. Happy to be doing it, too. But shucks—Jack had helped him out when he had his tail in a crack. Reckon these curly wolves know how to stick together!

The next day dawned bright and clear, without any trouble from Art Norcop and his gang. Things sorta settled back and started over like they were before the trial. Most of the boys were sobered up and ready to get to work and things took up where they had left off. Nobody had stolen our ranch, our herd was still there—so I got the boys busy starting them for the loading pens. Then I got my field glasses, loaded up my thirty-thirty and rode up on the mesa where I could see the country for ten miles around.

I could have stayed home and saved my strength. There wasn't a thing moved on the Jack-in-the-Box that day—except our own boys driving the stock to town for Stud Markham. Watching them was kind of a blow to my pride—I'd always thought they couldn't make a drive without me along.

They moved along without a hitch, taking it slow and steady like a good drive should be taken. Not wasting any time, but not running any weight off the stock, either. About noon Old Hennery took out with the chuck wagon so he could catch up with 'em before supper time. It never occurred to me that Jack and Lefty and I were the only men on the ranch.

CHAPTER XXIII

IT'S downright funny, sometimes, how people's greatest pleasures are in the

simplest things of life. I can remember back when Miss Sally was just a little button, going on four—she liked to blow out my matches, after I had lit my pipe, more than anything else she could do.

Now that she and Jack were all straightened out again, the most important thing in her mind was to cook us a bang-up good supper. Old Hennery was away with the boys—so she invited Lefty and me to come and eat with 'em. Lefty had run down a couple of Old Hennery's chickens and wrung their necks for her—and she spent the whole afternoon around the kitchen, whipping up some fancy food for us.

I came in from my watch up on the mesa around four o'clock. Lefty was already getting himself duded up. At six o'clock he was almost through. The sun-of-a-gun had even taken a bath—something practically unheard of by cowhands in the early winter. He had shaved twice over, put on a store shirt and used so much of Fats Bledsoe's hair tonic that he smelled like a high-class sportinghouse.

I tried to hurrah him a little about it, but it ran off him like water off a duck "You're sure going to have to eat with a fork," I told him. "How you going to keep from jabbing your face full of holes? Hell, you'll be leaking like a sieve before the meal is over."

"Eating with a fork ain't nothing. You're just showing your ignorance," Lefty said. "Why, I remember one time I was in the jug down in Fort Worth. Spent nearly two months in that blamed jail. Took 'em that long to find out I wasn't the guy they took me for. They thought I was a desperate character and wouldn't give me no knife to eat with. Had to eat with a fork or go hungry. Shucks, it wasn't more than a week or ten days before I was shoveling in the groceries like a regular year-'round fork user. Once you learn something like that, you never forget it. Ain't nothing to it—you could learn easy if you'd give her a try!"

"That calls for a drink," I said. We drank one to Miss Sally's health, and one to Young Jack's and had a couple of more on our own account. We were feeling right good and relaxed when we went up to the house to dinner—and we'd both plumb forgotten about Art Norcop and Frank Reilly and their bunch.

It was one of the best suppers I have ever set down to. Not the food, particularly—although it was mighty good. Food isn't exactly what I mean—there was something else present at that dinner. Peace, and quiet, and health, and happiness—all the things that had been missing from the Jack-in-the-Box for a couple of years. Young Jack Hamlin, with his name cleared, had turned out to be as good a man as his daddy before him. Miss Sally was well and strong and happy as all get-out. And Lefty Allen—he seemed like one of the family. We'd only known him a month or so, yet it seemed like he'd been one of us all our lives. Lefty was just plain happy to be there and share in what his friends were doing.

And me, Old Hugh McGovern, I'm tough as whang leather, but I mighty near cried I felt so good about it all. I might have known it was too good to last. Art Norcop horned in right in the middle of it and blew all our peace and contentment sky high!

WE HAD finished eating and gone into the big "front room" as they called it in those days. Great big, rambling room, with a piano in one end and a fireplace in the other, and all manner of fancy knick-knacks Old Jack Hamlin had bought when he built the place for his bride. Over the fireplace was a

big, gold-framed Chippendale mirror that had cost Old Jack a pretty penny and was the pride of his heart.

Young Jack was standing in front of the fireplace when it all happened. Lefty was over in the corner, admiring something or other in a Monkey Ward catalogue. I was just sitting there smoking, listening to Miss Sally playing the piano and singing some old song that had come out ten or twelve years before.

"—just a song at twillight,
When the lights are low—"

"Mighty pretty," sneered Art Norcop from the door, a six-gun in each hand. They'd sneaked up on us without either Lefty or me hearing them. Guess they'd seen the boys all driving the herd to town and knew they had us.

"Isn't it, now?" chimed in Frank Reilly from the other door. "It's touching, that's what it is, Art."

Two of the windows went up, and Monty Montgomery and two other jiggers climbed in one of them and three of Frank's gun-slingers came in the other.

"Yes, sir," Monty Montgomery said, "it's pretty and it's touching, boys. The happy husband, the beautiful bride, the song of love—it couldn't be more perfect. Home was never like this, Frank."

"It fairly touches my heart," Art Norcop said. "Better shut those windows, just in case there is anybody left on the place that might hear us."

They had us by the short hair for fair. We were sewed up tight—nine guns against us. Jack wasn't packing a gun at all, Lefty had his hide-out in a shoulder holster and I had my belly gun—but we didn't stand a chance against nine of them. Yes, sir, they had us by the short hair!

"You should have left the country, Art," Jack told him, not a whit scared. "It was a mistake to come back here—you should have gone when you could!"

"Everything in due time, Jack, my boy," Art said. "This is the last place Banks will think of looking for us. We'll be safe here for a spell. By the time one of your hands can get to town to report your unexpected accident, shall we say, we'll all be well over the border. No, we didn't make a mistake, Jack."

"We will likely kill two or three of you before you get us, Art. You'll kill us, all right, but we won't go out by ourselves. We may take you with us, Art. You better go on and get out now, without any trouble." Young Jack sounded cool as a cucumber, and I could see Miss Sally buck up just from the confidence in his voice.

"YOU haven't a chance, Jack Hamlin, and you know it—so don't try running any bluff on us. Your boys are all thirty or forty miles away from here, on the way to town with your stock. We'll burn you down before you can get your guns out if you try anything funny. That is, if you have any guns, which I doubt."

"Going to shoot us down in cold blood?" Jack asked. Somehow he didn't seem quite so confident. He glanced around kinda uneasy like, and I began to feel sorta uncertain myself. Lefty, I could see, didn't know quite how to take this change in Jack. Even Sally cast him a frightened look.

"You didn't expect anything else, did you, my friend?" Norcop asked, his voice icy cold. "Did you think you could ruin us, drive us out of the country, and not have to pay something for it?"

"Look, Art," Jack said, "I've had my share of trouble the last couple of years. I've had two years of pure, un-adulterated hell on your account. Isn't that enough?"

"Well, cheer up," Frank Reilly horned in, "you aren't going to have a whole lot more."

"Be reasonable, you fellows," Jack pleaded. "My wife has just got well. We are happy for the first time in two years. Take our ranch and our stock and our money—and let us go somewhere in peace. Somewhere we can live and be happy. I'll sign it all over to you, Art—the whole shooting match."

"That's big of you, Jack," Art sneered. "We were going to take your money anyway—we didn't get time to collect any before we left Silver City—but we can't use your ranch where we are going."

"Aw, hell, let's get it over with and get started," Frank Reilly said. "Somebody might come along any time. Let's do the job and hightail it."

"No, no, no!" screamed Miss Sally. "You can't do this to Jack. You can't do it!"

"Keep your chin up, honey," Jack told her, "and stand over there where you won't get hit. Art isn't going to shoot a woman. Nobody, not even him, is that low down." There was again that curious little note of confidence in his voice. I don't know what it was, but it was enough for Miss Sally. She went over and stood in the corner, without another word out of her. Lefty sensed it, too. I could see the muscles tensing under his shirt, like he was getting ready for something. It was then that I noticed the Krag that Jack had used at Signal Peak, leaning against the side of the fireplace. Another gun, I thought—three, now, against nine.

"Art,"—Jack began to plead a little—"you've known me a long time. You know I didn't get you into all this trouble on purpose. I didn't cook up all this mess. So do me one last favor before you kill me, won't you?"

WATCH this, I said to myself—something is coming. He is trying to tell me something. I watched Lefty through the mirror. His eyes had narrowed down to slits in his face—Lefty was ready for action as soon as he got the word!

"Dying man's last request, huh?" Art asked.

"Yeah," Jack said, "I don't want to go to hell with it following me, Art."

"With what following you, you poor damned fool?" Art asked.

"Seven years' bad luck, Art. All my life I've been afraid of busting a mirror or having one busted around me. I don't want seven years of bad luck to follow me to hell."

"What can I do about it?" Art sneered.

"Let me move away from this mirror, Art," Jack asked him. "Let me move away from this mirror before you shoot me, won't you?"

There it was—what I'd been waiting to hear! Jack was standing in front of the fireplace, his back to the big gilt mirror. The Krag was leaning against the corner of the fireplace to Jack's left. Farther around, in the center of the room, I stood with my hands in the air—and down in the far corner was Lefty Allen, tense as a cat! Miss Sally was at the opposite end of the room from Jack, reasonably safe from flying bullets. There we were, the four of us—with nine drawn guns bunched on us from the front!

"Hell," Art said in disgust, "go ahead. And you are the guy I always thought had guts!"

"Thanks, Art, thanks." Jack was almost groveling now—but it didn't fool anybody but Art! A little smile was starting at the corner of Lefty's mouth, the fighting fool!

"Promise me, Art—*don't shoot until I get away from the mirror!*" Jack said.

"Art," but it couldn't have been any plainer if he'd said "Lefty and Hugh." There was our orders! There was the plan!

Jack edged slowly along the fireplace, his hands still high in the air—and the same second he cleared the mirror hell broke loose in Georgia!

Lefty's gun hung loose, untouched on his left hip—but his right hand darted under his shirt like a snake striking! Yanking his gun from his shoulder holster he blazed away right-handed, while Jack made a dive for the Krag!

Four men went down from Lefty's gun before he collapsed, riddled with bullets—but Jack came through to take his place, and the booming of his Krag as he levered bullets into it sounded like thunder in that ranch-house room. Jack's first shot took Art Norcop square between the eyes. Frank Reilly was already down—and I dropped Monty Montgomery with my belly gun. The two men left threw down their guns.

IT WAS all over in less time than it takes to tell about it. Nobody was hurt but Lefty—but he had taken enough punishment for all of us. He was bleeding from half a dozen wounds!

"Don't stand there in a stupor, Hugh," Jack snapped at me. "Get a doctor and get one damned quick. Kill a horse getting him, but get him here quick." He rushed over to Lefty—but Miss Sally was there before him, stopping the bleeding with napkins she had snatched from the dinner table as she went by.

I got a lucky break going for the doctor. Five miles out, headed for Silver City, I met old Doc McClary coming back from delivering a baby over on Salt Creek.

"What's your hurry, Hugh?" McClary asked.

"Whip up those horses of yours, Doc. We got a man with six bullet holes in him bleeding to death!" I told him and McClary didn't waste any time asking questions. He turned his buggy on two wheels and whipped his bays until they fairly flew!

The doc plugged up the holes in Lefty and gave him a shot in the arm so that he wouldn't die in pain—if he did die. But you can't kill guys like Lefty.

Jack told me, next morning, what Lefty had said while I was gone for the doctor. "The guts of him, Hugh! Blazing away at nine men—and then apologizing to me for only getting four of them before they burned him down."

"What did he say, Jack?" I asked.

"He came to after a while and said, 'You all right, boss?' I told him—'Yea, I was all right.' After a while he come to again and said, 'I got two or three more of 'em than you did, boss. I tried to get 'em all, but I just couldn't cut it. I just couldn't.' Then he passed out again, Hugh, and he hasn't come to since."

"God won't let a man like him die, Jack," Miss Sally told him softly.

Lefty wavered around on the borderline between life and death for over a week. Guess he might have cashed in at that, if Miss Sally hadn't tended him night and day and sorta heckled him into getting well. Finally he got to where he was conscious a little more every day and the first thing you know Miss Sally was pumping broth into him every chance she got.

One morning I was sitting there waiting for Lefty to wake up, when he opened the one eye and surprised me by saying, "Hugh, you reckon you could connive with Old Hennery somehow and get me a little hunk of steak or something I could sink my teeth in? Hell, this here quail soup is beginning to run out my ears. It's mighty fine soup, and I appreciate Miss Sally a fix-

ing it for me—but, I'd like to sharpen my teeth on one of Old Hennery's steaks."

I reported this to Miss Sally, feeling like it was my duty, since she was ramrodding the sick room. She was tickled pink. "That settles it, Jack—we can start packing up any time—Lefty's going to be all right."

And Lefty soon was. Fit as a fiddle in no time at all. Soon as he was able to sit up a little, Young Jack and Miss Sally packed up and caught the train for San Francisco. Said they were going to rest up and then raise hell and then rest up until they got tired of raising hell and resting up. Then they were going to buy all the new dresses in town for Miss Sally and come home. They were gone a long time, it seemed like. Guess we all kinda missed them both more than we would admit.

Lefty and I were talking about it the other night over some Old Crow. I'd been trying to persuade him to take over the foreman's job this fall when I retire—but Lefty thought one of the boys that had been here longer ought to take it. I put it up to the boys and they said they'd be just as glad to have Lefty foreman as they would to get me off their backs. So Lefty took the job.

Miss Sally insisted on naming the twins "Hugh and Lefty." Don't know who is the proudest—Lefty or me. Lefty says he's going to train his to outshoot mine, but shucks!—I was shooting before Lefty was born!

THE SIX-GUN LICKED THE INDIAN

WHEN you think of Western thrillers, you usually think of the courageous pioneers—Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill Hickock, Calamity Jane, and others—don't you? But the success of the conquest of the Wild West was not based entirely upon human beings. Not at all, for without one invention, the Indians could not have been beaten when they were. This invention was the six-shooter.

Let's look at a typical battle situation between the Texans and the Comanches. The Indians, without a doubt, had the advantage in weapons. Each Comanche carried 40 or more arrows; each Texan carried at most three shots. And it took the Texan one minute to reload his gun—during that time, the Indian could ride 300 yards and discharge 20 arrows. The Texan could not shoot while on his horse; therefore, he had to dismount and remain in one place in order to shoot his rifle at all effectively. The Indian, of course, could ride throughout combat.

The only advantage of the Texan—a weapon of longer range and more deadly effect—was overshadowed by the ability of the Comanche to be so flexible and rapid in his movement. For a while, then, things looked bad for our fighting pioneers.

The first time that pistols were used in a fight with Indians was at the battle of the Pedernales. Fifteen Rangers had gone out from San Antonio to look for Indians. Upon their return, they observed that they were being followed by about 70 Comanches. Historical records show that the Rangers "shot them down with their *pistols*." More than 30 Indians were killed while the Rangers suffered only a few casualties. "That was considered the best-contested fight that ever took place in Texas, and it showed that the Rangers could whip the Indians on horseback—the pistols gave them the advantage." History's first account of the dynamic power of this new invention!

In 1850, Major George T. Howard of the old Texas army and Captain I. S. Sutton of the Rangers wrote the following:

"The revolver is the only weapon which enabled the experienced frontiersmen to defeat the *mounted* Indian in his own peculiar mode of warfare. We state, and with entire assurance of the fact, that your six-shooter is the arm which has rendered the name of Texas Ranger a check and terror to the bands of our frontier Indians."

In a short time, there was a rapid spread of the six-shooter over the whole Plains area. The overwhelming advantages possessed by the mounted Indian warrior were no longer a threat to the armed frontiersman.

Today, "six-shooter" and "Westerner of the Plains" are common associations in the mind of every American. The movies have emphasized how they "wore 'em low on the right leg, and pulled 'em smoking'." Perhaps, then, there were times when the six-shooter outgrew its usefulness. But whatever sins the six-shooter may have to answer for, it stands as the first mechanical adaptation made by the American people when they emerged from the timber and met a set of new needs in the open country of the Great Plains.

—*Bob Neddo.*

". . . BOUND TO DELIGHT . . ."

Sirs:

News that my novel, "Bullets Don't Need Names," was to be the featured story in your new publication, is most gratifying to me. My familiarity with the other Ziff-Davis magazines is assurance enough that MAMMOTH WESTERN will be different from the average run of such books—a difference that is bound to delight those who love stories of the West.

Please accept my sincere wishes for your success. R. M. HANKINS.

His own novel is evidence of what Mr. Hankins means by "different from the average run." Here are real people with real problems; and with the elements of excellent characterization and true-to-life dialogue without which no story has any claim to greatness.—ED.

CONGRATULATIONS

Sirs:

The news that Ziff-Davis plans a western story magazine is certainly welcome. I've been a steady reader of your other magazines for many years, and I certainly intend to get acquainted with this new baby!

To me, your initials on a magazine mean class, and plenty of it. Congratulations.

HENRY GADOUAS,
2618 W. Michigan Street,
Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Thanks, Henry. And we hope that as you read this, you'll find your confidence in us justified. We've tried to give this book everything a western magazine should have.

By the way, how about trying a story yourself? We remember fondly a few you've had in Amazing Stories and Mammoth Detective in the past. Your initials on a yarn usually stand for something too!—ED.

NO BARNACLES!

Sirs:

Your friendly note telling me "Outlaw Outpost" is being included in the first issue of MAMMOTH WESTERN, was received a few days ago but this is my first opportunity of replying.

Naturally, I am flattered at being one of the authors chosen to help in launching your new magazine on its first cruise. May it carry a million passengers and never acquire a barnacle!

E. E. HALLERAN.

Your best wishes are appreciated, Mr. Halleran, and we hope to have the opportunity of giving the readers of future issues of MAMMOTH WESTERN *more of your fine stories.*—ED.

FROM THE SOUTH PACIFIC

Sirs:

Even 'way out here on a lonely island in the South Pacific, we get news of what is going on at home—often before there is any formal announcement. By that same grapevine comes word that you folks are planning on bringing out a new western magazine, and, believe me, we are looking forward to getting that first copy.

Most of my gang eat up western stories; in fact, between them and detective stories we read hardly anything else. For that reason, the news—if true—is welcome indeed. If it comes up to the other mags you guys put out, you can be sure we'll be perfectly satisfied!

S/SERGEANT LOU MEYERS,
Military Secret,
U.S.A.

There's nothing wrong with that grapevine of yours, Sergeant—and here's the first issue to prove it. In our humble way, we think MAMMOTH WESTERN *measures up as an equal of the other books in our string, and we've a strong hunch you're going to point that out to us once you've read the stories it contains.*—ED.

NOBODY UNDERSTANDS US!

Sirs:

Sometimes I wonder about you editors! When I wrote "Deal 'Em Deep But Not Dirty," I figured it wasn't a bad yarn for a guy who'd never tackled a western story before . . . in fact, one who hadn't even *read* a "six-shooter and stirrups" thriller since high school days.

But when you not only paid out good money for the story but scheduled it for the first issue of your western book . . . well, you can see why I wonder about editors!

Seriously, I'm very pleased about being one of the gang chosen to make up your first copy, and I hope I can get myself included in those that follow. BERKELEY LIVINGSTON

Such modesty comes close to being conduct unbecoming an author! We put your story in the first issue of MAMMOTH WESTERN, *Berkeley, because the plot is unusual and because you handled it very well, indeed. We think the readers will agree.*—ED.

BUFFALO BILL

(SEE BACK COVER)

ONE of the most colorful and heroic figures in United States history is William Cody. Although much of his life was dramatized and exaggerated by press agents, he did lead a dangerous and outstanding life. As long as the wild plains of the west offered him the proper and necessary surroundings, he was one of the most popular men in the country. In reality, however, when he was barely twenty-six most of the wild plains had become peaceful civilized communities with little need for daring personages like Bill Cody. But nevertheless, he had a dynamic personality and held the attention of the country until he was an old man. When he was only eight years old, he held at bay a gang of horse thieves, and while doing so shot one of them through the heart. Thus Bill Cody began his courageous career at the tender age of eight.

Bill Cody was born in Iowa on February 26, 1846. His family soon moved to Kansas where Bill was placed in a very strategic place. In this state there was little law and recklessness was the true. People lived and died by the gun. The one who could shoot the straightest lived the longest. Also, there were woods in which there roamed many wild animals which could be trapped or killed. Westward there were great herds of that huge, shaggy, mysterious animal, the buffalo. Throughout the territory existed numerous tribes of Indians who were anything but friendly. In this country, young Bill became acquainted with many hunters, Indians, and scouts who willingly and energetically taught him the lore of the wilderness and he eagerly absorbed all this knowledge. At this time there was very much agitation and conflict over the question of slavery which, because Bill's father was anti-slave, gave Bill the opportunity to learn how to fight. That is, many of the pro-slave ruffians attempted to kill Bill's father, Isaac, and Bill was therefore engaged quite frequently in warding off these would-be murderers. Once a band of ruffians entered the Cody home intent on killing Isaac, but their attempt failed because of the grim determination of Bill to kill anybody who attempted to enter his father's room. Finally his father left the territory for the sake of safety.

Then at the age of eleven young Bill obtained a job as a scout with the Russell, Mojors and Waddell firm. While out on a trip for this company, Bill encountered and killed his first Indian. The wagon train and steers had been put away for the night when a band of Indians attacked the party, killing several guards and stampeding the cattle. The men, including the boy Bill, fired several volleys in order to check the surprise attack and then they proceeded to depart rather readily for cover. The Indians, however, followed the men all night, and, because of his youth, Bill lagged behind the other stronger men. About ten o'clock he cast a glance backward and in doing so caught a glimpse of an Indian in the moonlight. Instead of shouting for help, he drew a bead on the Indian and calmly shot him through the head. The other men, upon hearing the shot, raced back to where Bill stood and were astonished to learn that this youngster of eleven had killed an Indian. Upon returning to the base, Bill Cody was acclaimed the "youngest Indian slayer on the plains" and this incident was the actual start of his wide public career.

A little later on, the phrase "Pike's Peak or Bust!" was going around and people were commencing to migrate to Denver. Young Bill, being of an adventurous nature, started with several young boys on the arduous trip to Denver. However, he did not succeed at mining and it was not long before he returned to Leavenworth, his home town, dead broke. Yet Bill was just barely fifteen years of age. It was at this time that he saved the life of a young girl. The girl was playing outside the door of her cabin without any thought that she was in danger when, without warning, a huge buffalo ran madly at her. Then Bill Cody came riding down the trail, and seeing the spectacle, coolly drew his gun and shot the animal dead when it was only twelve yards from the child.

With the advent of gold rushes, William Cody became a pony express rider for Russells at the ripe age of fourteen. While with this outfit, he met up with one of the deadliest killers of that era. Joe Slade who, it was said, would kill a man if he happened to look at him in a manner which displeased him. Slade, working with this same outfit, gave Bill a trial on one of the rough routes even though he was only fourteen years old. It was on this route that Cody executed his long ride. After traveling seventy-five miles through rough terrain from Red Butte on the Platte to Three Crossings of the Sweetwater, he arrived at his destination only to discover that there was no relief rider to carry the mail further on. Bill, although dead tired, mounted a fresh horse and started off again. At Rocky Ridge he was met by the rider from the west, who gave him the east-bound mail, and then he started straight back to Red Butte. This continuous journey lasted twenty-one hours and the total distance traveled was over three hundred and twenty miles. This ride was somewhat of a record run, although some other pony express riders claim longer rides. However, being a fourteen-year-old boy his feat was praised throughout the territory.

AT THE age of eighteen, Bill enlisted in the United States army at Fort Leavenworth on February 19, 1864. He was engaged in various skirmishes against Price's army in the south and did much in the way of spy work behind the Confederate lines. He also engaged in very much scouting work for the Union forces. After the war, he married Louisa Frederici when he was twenty years old. At this time a railroad was being built through the western lands and the firm of Goddard Brothers contracted with the railroad to supply it with buffalo meat for the workers. The company initially offered Wild Bill Hickok the job of killing buffalo. But he refused and referred them to Bill Cody who eagerly grasped at the job for $500.00 a month. In carrying out his assignment, Cody used a 50-caliber Springfield, which he nicknamed Lucretia Borgia, and a fleet horse named Brigham. Within eighteen months, he killed 4,280 buffalo, an average of eight buffalo every day for a year and a half. Because of this feat one of the workmen made up the rhyme which gave Bill Cody his famous nickname, "Buffalo Bill."

"Buffalo Bill, Buffalo Bill
Never missed and never will;
Always aims and shoots to kill
And the company pays his buffalo bill."

Buffalo Bill lost his job when construction on the railroad ceased. He consequently returned to Fort Larned where he served under General Sheridan. The friendship between General Sheridan and Buffalo Bill sprang up when Bill volunteered to carry an urgent message through ninety-five miles of Indian infested territory to Fort Dodge. He came through the mission unharmed. Moreover, the officer at Fort Dodge had an important paper which no one would carry to Fort Larned. So Buffalo Bill started back on a government mule, much to his disgust. After traveling a while, Bill dismounted to get a drink of water. This was his undoing because the mule started on his own toward the fort, and Bill therefore had to follow the mule on foot for thirty-five miles. When the fort loomed in sight, the mule laughed as if to ridicule Bill. This angered Buffalo Bill so much that he immediately shot the animal through the head. General Sheridan said that "Cody rode three hundred and fifty miles in less than sixty hours, and such an exhibition of endurance and courage was more than enough to convince me that his services would be extremely valuable in the campaign; so I retained him at Fort Hayes until the Batallion of Fifth Cavalry arrived, and then made him chief of scouts for that regiment."

Later Buffalo Bill left the plains to enter a play in the east which depicted life on the wild plains with Bill Cody as the star. However, after his only child died he left the theater and returned to the plains. When he returned a widespread Indian war against the whites was in progress, and already the Indians, under the leadership of Sitting Bull, had slaughtered Custer. During the ensuing Indian conflict Bill was in constant battle with the Indians. Once Cody and his men were surprisingly attacked by a body of Indians. Cody and his men retaliated and finally the battle quieted down to a matter of waiting for one to make a move. Eventually a young chief, Yellow Hand, strode out in front of his lines and challenged Buffalo Bill to a personal duel. The reason he chose Bill was probably due to the fact that he wore a rather peculiar outfit: a beautiful Mexican suit of dark velvet, colored with scarlet and decorated with lace. Why he was dressed up in this outfit is unexplainable. Buffalo Bill readily accepted the challenge and rode toward the young Indian at full speed. He raised his rifle and fired killing the Indian's horse; at the same time Bill's horse stepped into a gopher's hole and fell. But Bill instantly sprang to his feet while the Indian did likewise. They both fired and fortunately for Bill the Indian's aim was bad, whereas his bullet struck the Indian in the breast. Immediately Bill sprang at the falling Indian and drove his knife into the heart of the savage and in a few seconds scalped the Indian. This whole battle lasted only a few minutes and soon the other Indians were springing toward Bill, filled with vengeance. But the resourceful General Merritt, noticing that Bill was in grave danger, ordered his troops to charge to the rescue. At the same time, Bill waved the scalp in the air and shouted "The first scalp for Custer." The soldiers then chased the Indains clear back to the reservation. This episode of courage and valor gave Bill a tremendous amount of publicity; in fact, it occupied a whole column in the New York Herald.

Cody claimed the Sioux were most dangerous because of their intelligence and ingenuity. They had, he said, not only courage but real strategy. They fought always to win, careless of life.

His battle with Yellow Hand practically ended Bill's life on the wild plains. He returned to the East to star in several successful shows in which he put into effect his long cherished plan of presenting to the public an untarnished, realistic picture of the wild west. Many of the plays were based on his thrilling and successful encounter with Yellow Hand. Many of them depicted the traditions, problems, and peculiar situations of the western lands. Later on in life Bill bought and developed rich cattle ranches and he traveled abroad as if he were a king. However, he soon lost most of his wealth in the shows and finally in the valiant attempt to regain his wealth his health broke. On January 10, 1917 he took his last breath. The death of Buffalo Bill not only ended the life of one of America's most popular heroes but it also ushered out the last trace of the great wild west as it was in the days when men lived and died by the gun. However, the name Buffalo Bill will always remain as one of the greatest American historic personages.

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